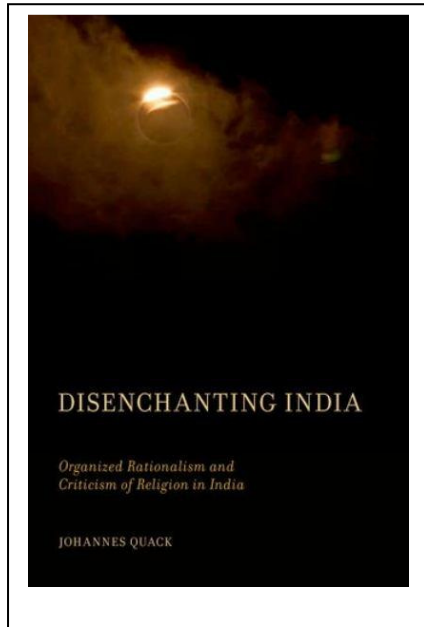


## Disenchanted India: Introduction

*Johannes Quack*



India is the land of religion. Max Weber described the everyday life of the Indian masses as taking place within an “enchanted garden of life” formed by charismatic gurus, characterized by the unbroken belief in magical powers of irrational efficacy, and devoid of an escape to a rational, this-worldly way of life (see Weber 1963: 369-370). Even in the 21st century, India seems entirely preoccupied with religion, spirituality, magic and miracles. Well, not entirely....

This book is about the Indian rationalist, atheist, humanist, and freethinking movement, a movement that is based on the explicit intent to challenge belief in magical powers of irrational efficacy, as well as the influence of charismatic gurus, so as to tackle the harm and injustices the rationalists see as resulting from such beliefs. Their explicit aim is to show their fellow Indians a way out of their enchanted world toward a rational, this-worldly way of life. While the Indian rationalists argue themselves that India has for far too long been preoccupied with religion and spirituality, magic and miracles, they, at the same time stress the fact that there has always been rationalism and criticism of religion within India:

*India is not only a land of religion, superstition and blind beliefs, but also of atheism, rationalism, humanism, scepticism and agnosticism. It is a land of enlightenment, philosophical quest for truth and practical application of [rationalistic] principles for common good. It is the birthplace of the Buddha and Mahavcera, and also of Charvakas and Lokayatas and Samkhya philosophy. In the Middle Ages, Saint Kabir challenged the idol worship and strove for national and social integration...The dawn of the modern Age was accelerated by outstanding social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Kesav Chandra Sen, Pandita Ramabai, Mahadeo Govinda Ranade, Maharshi Karve, Kandukuri Veersalingam and many others who brought a new awakening among people and heralded a new era... Similarly, Bharat Ratna Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar led an*

*uncompromising struggle against caste system and untouchability. It was Jawaharlal Nehru who spearheaded the struggle for modernisation and secularisation and strove incessantly for promotion of scientific temper and humanism. Periyar, EV Ramaswami, MN. Roy, Gora and Abraham Kovoov were the architects of the atheist, humanist, rationalist and freethinker movement in modern India.*

(G. Vijayam)

This statement by G Vijayam, the executive director of the Atheist Centre in Vijaywada (Andhra Pradesh) gives an insiders perspective on the roots of the contemporary atheist, humanist, rationalist, and freethinker movement in India. This book addresses this genealogy through an extensive historical overview that engages with the rationalist's own perspective on their roots in ancient Vedic times and the importance of the Bhakti movement. Further the embedding of contemporary rationalism in the religious and social reform movements of the 19th century India as well as the influence of anti-religious organization of the 19th century England are discussed.

Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork this book also discusses the aims, activities, and criticisms of the organization *Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti* (ANiS – Organisation for the Eradication of Superstition) in Maharashtra. At the core of this case study lies a “thick description” of the way in which ANiS activists try to spread scientific temper and eradicate superstition, an analysis of their profile and agenda, as well as an engagement with the way in which rationalistic worldview influences the everyday life of the rationalists. On this basis it is argued that the main characteristic features of organized rationalism in Indian can be described as consisting of a specific “mode of unbelief”. In addition, the relationship between organized rationalism in India and like-minded groups in the West is addressed. By contextualizing the Indian rationalist movement in a transitional and trans-cultural perspective, this book addresses the way in which groups like ANiS can be seen contributing to a wider international movement that advocates a secular, materialistic, and naturalistic worldview. This contextualization of Indian rationalism ends with a discussion of the interconnections between rationalism, as understood by the Indian rationalists and rationalistic positions within socio-political debates in India, as well as international academia.

This book contributes empirically as well as theoretically to a field of study that has widely been neglected in the cultural sciences. The spectrum of non-religiosity and unbelief in India, from religious indifference to outright criticism of religion(s). Empirically, it is

particularly significant that, in the case of India, very little serious academic work has been done on antireligious movements. This is largely because scholars of India tend to, as an anonymous reviewer for this book put it, concentrate on the many religions of India under the frequently unchallenged assumption that Indians are ‘notoriously religious’ (to paraphrase what the African scholar J.S. Mbiti said about African societies). This predilection for studying the religions of India has led to a dearth of scholarly material exploring popular rationalist and atheist groups in India of which ANiS is an important example.

One major theoretical contribution of this book to the study of organized rationalism, unbelief and criticism of religion(s) is the notion “mode of unbelief”. On the one hand, the distinguishing characteristics of rationalist organizations like ANiS are summarized under this rubric. This analysis, on the other hand, goes beyond the specific characteristics of the Indian rationalist movement by building theoretically upon the notion “modes of religiosity” as established by the historian of religion Ulrich Berner. It is argued that it is more fruitful to compare specific modes of religiosity and unbelief rather than opposing religion or religions and atheism or non-religion. This approach challenges standard analytical approaches towards religion(s) by allowing new systematic descriptions and comparisons of different modes of unbelief and modes of religiosity, undermining thereby the abstract opposition between religion and atheism or religiosity and unbelief.

The book's second theoretical focus connects to the classic discussion of secularism and modernity begun by the work of Max Weber and continuing to the contemporary debates on Charles Taylor's magnum opus *A Secular Age* (2007). This includes a discussion of Weber's differentiation between the concepts “rationality”, “rationalism”, and “rationalization” as well as a critical analysis of Weber's master narrative of “disenchantment” as applied and situated in a particular analytic framework by Charles Taylor. This book thereby contributes to the extensive debates triggered by the publication of *A Secular Age*, especially on the blog “The Immanent Frame” of the American Social Science Research Council (SSRC) with initial contributions from Talal Asad, Robert Bellah, and Charles Taylor himself.

This ethnography of organized rationalism in India is, finally, situated in the contemporary debates about the general nature of rationalism in Indian intellectual life and cultural politics. The empirical and theoretical contribution of this book are thereby contextualized in contemporary debates that take place within Anthropology and Religious Studies, as well as Postcolonial and Global Studies, Sociology, and History. Most important

here is the postcolonial critique of “scientific rationalism” as made explicit, for example, in numerous publications by Ashis Nandy (1988, 1989, 1995, 2004), in books like *Provincializing Europe* (2000) by Dipesh Chakraharty or *Another Reason* (1999) by Gyan Prakash or, for that matter, in postcolonial writings on and from other parts of the world (see, e.g., Alcott 2007). In opposition to these positions there is also a prominent defense of scientific rationalism as outlined, for example, in Meera Nanda’s *Prophets Facing Backward* (2006a) and many of her other publications (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2006b). This line of argument resembles the position taken by Allan Sokal in the so-called Science Wars. Sokal himself contributed to the debates in India (1998, 2000 and 2005). It is argued that scholars like Nandy and Nanda, at the same time, address the aims and activities of groups like ANiS, socio-political questions relevant to the wider Indian society, as well as issues central to contemporary debates in the cultural sciences within which they represent opposing academic positions (for an overview see Maffie 2005 and Rajana 2005). Rationalism as understood and applied by Indian rationalist groups is therefore to be understood as embedded in and interconnected with the debates about rationalism inside as well as outside the realms of cultural politics and academia.

The first part of this book introduces Indian rationalists as well as the main theoretical questions raised, and ends with a short outline of the fieldwork conducted and methods applied. In the second part I give an overview of the history of the Indian rationalist movement and the rationalists' emphasis on maintaining links to ancient India alongside its modern European roots. At the heart of the book is the third part, in which I describe and analyze the aims and activities of the rationalists in India through an ethnographic case study of ANiS. I conclude in the fourth part with a discussion and a detailed description of the specific mode of unbelief of ANiS activists which explains their motivation and exemplifies the distinguishing characteristics of the Indian rationalist movement. In the epilogue, the main arguments of the book are extended by raising questions that go beyond the remit of the ethnography and address general issues connected to researching rationalism.

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*Johannes Quack,*  
Oxford University Press  
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## Has the idol aged or is this a mockery of Shri Viththal?

*Yadneshwar Nigale*

This happened in Madgaon; South Goa's cultural centre and educational capital. The hair of the idol in the Viththal Mandir turned grey. The idol appeared to have grown old overnight. The bad omen was promptly connected with the recent accidental death of the temple priest. The rumor spread like wild fire. Everybody, right from the ministers to the lowly clerks, wanted to see the miracle with their own eyes. People gathered in thousands. Not one of them considered the possibility of the hair turning grey because of some whitish liquid or ointment inadvertently stuck to the head of the idol; despite the fact that we all are bound by our constitution to nurture scientific outlook. The next day the temple priest performed the usual ceremonial ablution (pouring water etc.) on the idol, and the sticky white layer of milk and curds of the previous ablution got washed away. The idol when anointed with oil regained its youthful look!

The pity of it all is that, this happened in Madgao, less than a year after the Maharashtra ANS (movement for eradication of superstition) had organized a Yatra (march) for investigation of miracles in this city; the city that has produced a number of eminent persons who raised Goa to its glory. Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, the president of ANS had accompanied the march and had delivered a speech examining and investigating miracles and incidents that appear to be miraculous. He illustrated with examples, how on critically examining the so called miraculous incidents, their scientific causes come into light and the aura of mystery disappears. These incidents then become ordinary facts of life. Sadly, the large crowds that listened to him attentively forgot his message when they gathered to see the grey hair of their favourite deity.

### **Critical examination destroys the halo around miracles:**

Although miracles are impossible, everyone seems to be enamoured of the phenomenon. Crowds gather wherever a miracle like incident takes place. Some shrewd men in the society take advantage of this psyche of the people and utilize it to increase the supposedly inherent majesty and nobility of a place where they have vested interest. Such an incident occurred three years back in Dicholi Borde, in the temple dedicated to Lord Vadeshwar (Shankar). In the courtyard of this temple there is a statue of a horse made of plaster. It has five heads. There is a tiny mound, resembling the Shiva's phallus under the belly of this horse. One fine day, some passersby saw that water was dripping from the horse's belly on the Shiva's phallus below it. It surely was, for them, a miracle- a horse

performing ‘Abhishek on a Shivalinga’! In a very short while people from all directions crowded over there. To add to the mystery, Mahashivaratra (Shiva’s festival) was, coincidentally, just a couple of days ahead. This helped the superstitious people to add two and two and connect the horse’s Abhishek to lord Shiva’s miracle.

The incident really was one that very commonly occurs. The plaster of horse’s body had developed cracks. During the consecration of the horse on certain occasions, water seeped into the belly of the horse through these cracks. The inside of the horse was plastered with wax. But on this day, due to the summer heat, the wax melted and water started dripping through the cracks on to the mound below. The mound consisted of cement and mud. The dripping water shaped the mound into a few Shivalingas. In this incident neither did the horse perform any ‘Abhishek’ nor were there any Shivalingas below its belly. But the wild imagination of the devotees is equally matched with their utter inability to think- think logically and rationally. They have no need to examine the occurrences. They readily see miracle in any unusual happenstance.

Now with such a social psyche, if the eyes of a deity’s idol start watering, it sure is a miracle. Such an incident took place in the Chamundeshwari Temple of the Mysore state, during the British Raj. It wasn’t a miracle but a machination of the temple priest. It happened thus: The eyes of the idol started watering all of a sudden. The temple priest promptly brought this to the notice of the Maharaja. He instructed, Sir Mirza Ismail, the Divan of the state, to investigate into the matter. He in turn sent one investigating officer to the temple, who minutely examined idol and its surroundings. This revealed that the crown Placed on the head of the idol was hollow and connected through tube to the indentations in the eyes of the idol by the side of the nose. The wax on the indentations was scratched out. So, when the crown was filled with water it oozed out of the idol’s eyes-the sacred tears of the deity. Why did the priest indulge in this machination? The priestly class did not approve of a Muslim becoming their Divan. But the Maharaja could neither be intimidated nor fooled. Both the miracle and the temple priest were exposed.

More sensational than the above was the news that the image of Jesus Christ was shedding tears of blood. This happened quite recently, just six months back, in the house of Mascharhenus a resident of Kamurli Village, in Sasashti Taluka. The news, as usual, spread like wild fire. Devotees-both educated and uneducated, from all around gathered into Kamurli to see the miracle with their own eyes. But none of them thought over whether it is possible that the reddish tears really contain blood. In fact, Christianity does not approve of performing miracles. Jesus Christ himself denounced performing miracles. He correctly

maintained that belief in miracles misleads people and hides the truth from them. Despite this teaching of Jesus Christ, the Catholic nations of Europe are replete with idols of weeping Madonna. Tears flowing from the eyes of an idol is no more a miracle there. Everybody there knows that idols of plaster, being porous, can easily be made to shed tears. Adding some chemicals the tears become bloody!

**Vision of a Trident- a psychological ‘miracle’**

The most controversial Tantrik (versed in the Tantras-charms, rites, precepts), Chadraswami, in order to enhance his phony self imposed nobility, concocted the miracle of ‘drinking milk by Ganesh idols’. Dr. Yashpal and Dr. Jayant Narlikar immediately explained the physical causes of this incredible phenomenon that was given enough publicity by the media. And yet, there are quite a few individuals who believed that the idols drank only that milk offered by pious men only and not any others. But the fact, as explained by the two eminent scientists, is that ‘sipping of milk by the Ganesh Idol’ is not at all a miracle. It is caused by two scientific processes happening simultaneously. They are ‘Capillary action’ and ‘Surface Tension’. A simple experiment can explain these processes. If you keep a corner of a blotting paper dipped into the ink bottle, the ink absorbed by the blotting paper rises up against the gravitational force. Any groove or scratch resembling a capillary can cause Capillary action. So the idols do not ‘drink milk’; the milk is simply absorbed. Moreover not only the Ganesh Idol but any idol for that matter can exhibit this property and ‘absorb’ milk or any liquid (beer or rum for example) offered by both pious and impious men and women, on any day and at any time; because the natural laws are universal. There is no miraculous or supernatural power involved in it.

Last year, a rumor of another miracle spread that ‘marks of the letter Om and trident’ in red colour are seen on Shivalingas. Devotees in huge queues gathered in all Shiva temples. It was only a rumor. Some devotee of Shiva might have seen such marks on the Shivalinga. Of course the question remains; why should Shiva’s devotee happen to see such marks? The science of Hypnotism has an answer to this question. A devotee can go into a hypnotic state because of the combined effect of his intense devotion towards god; his earnest longing for meeting his god and his getting engrossed in Bhajan, Poojan, and Kirtan. He is self hypnotized and feels that he has met with his god. A devotee whose ‘mind’s eye’ sees a Shivaling with the marks of Om and Trishul (trident) in red on it, and worships that Shivalinga with all concentration will get self hypnotized and actually see the Om and trishul marks. For him the marks are real and right there. He reveals this ‘reality’ to fellow devotees.

The possibility of their seeing such marks is meager but they too want to be ahead in the race for devotion and may pretend to have seen the marks. Such is the root of rumor.

If a stone idol starts sweating, should it not be considered a miracle? Such a miracle did take place in the Jain Mandir situated in Dhule city, about four years back. A rumor spread that the three huge idols of Shreyasnath, Sheetalnath and Kunthunath in that temple have started sweating. Thousands of devotees flocked to the temple. The crowd became unmanageable. A mild Lathi charge was called for to stop the hooligans from taking advantage of the painful jamming. The simple question-as to how can a stone idol sweat, did not strike any devotee. Finally journalist took the initiative and with help of geologist explained the so called miracle.

These idols are carved out of basalt rock. The unique atmosphere created by the stone structure of the temple caused dampness on the idols. This was the combined result of three factors- the high temperature outside the temple, the comparatively much cooler atmosphere in the sanctum sanctorum and the moist air of the temple. As the dampness on the idols increased, it condensed into water and trickled down the idols. This was an atmospheric process. But for the gullible devotees it was a miracle.

This same mentality was revealed in the episode of ‘Viththal’s hair turning grey’ with which we began. The people mortgaged their ability to reason and connected the graying of deity’s hair with his aging. Isn’t this an inadvertent mockery of the deity ‘Shri Viththal’? Once you assume that the god has become old, the next step automatically leads to his demise. The concept of God is a pious and a noble concept. The God in this concept is ever young and immortal, completely free from old age and death. But regretfully our reasoning ability has freezed and rusted because of complete lack of use!

(Translated by Ms Suman Oak)



## **Why I Am an Atheist?**

*Ramesh Nagaragere*

Like any child born into a middle class, upper caste family in India I was also part of the traditional ways of thinking and living, but with a touch of liberalism. I was initiated to be a dwija (twice born) at a very young age as it happens in the case of most of the male children of such families and I accepted all the practices without a trace of doubt or question. However, the liberal air which was also pervading the family had its own dose of impact on



me. Though I accepted all the practices without question, I was not very serious about performing them and was not very much convinced about their efficacy either.



Gradually I came to be introduced to new writings even when in high school. These writings did their work silently and I began to question, though mockingly, some of the traditional practices which were and are common in many such families as mine. But I was not yet skeptical about the existence of god as such. I used to visit temples as a

faithful devotee though was not very much given to indulge in the performances which were too long and monotonous. When I entered college my doubts about the traditional beliefs and practices got extended to the very idea of god. I was introduced to the writings of Bertrand Russell and through him to other such thoughts which reflected his positions. Though not strictly a student of science, I came to be convinced that it is science and scientific thinking which formed the basis for a proper understanding of the world and its physical structure. Similarly, it also began to dawn on me that questions about human life and existence also could be answered better if one followed the method of science, instead of simply ascribing every thing to the power of god. Then there were also questions about the different perceptions about the idea of god, which had been present some where in my mind ever since I was a school going boy I had quite a few friends belonging to different religions. But I had not taken those questions seriously then. As I began to probe matters pertaining to god and religion at a stage when I was more mature I could understand, I thought, the beginning of the concept of god better. I was convinced that god was nothing but a result of human imagination which was a necessary at a time when humans needed to have explanations for the various natural phenomena which they could not scientifically explain for want of the much needed information about them. During this period I was also strongly drawn towards Marxism and that did it all.

This understanding of god also made me try to understand various superstitions which had their origin in the ignorant past. But strangely they continue to plague humanity even when not needed and what is more, even when it is possible to explain many of the so called

inexplicable phenomena. I was wonderstruck that people acclaimed to be highly knowledgeable were also given to superstitions and had no qualms about becoming the disciples of god-men and women. They were also sincerely following all the old ways of living and thinking unquestioningly. I asked my self, is it mere ignorance or hypocrisy? What ever it was, I decided that was not going to be my way.

Then there had always been this question of the caste distinctions bothering me since my school days. I had my class mates who were not treated as we used to be treated out side the class room. Especially the elders in the family, though were kind towards them because they were poor and were always ready to help them, were not allowing them to enter the precincts of the house. And I was also advised not to touch them. I could not understand why, but had to follow the instructions at least in the presence of the elders. The explanation that I got, that they were from lower or untouchable caste failed to make any sense, but I dared not, or perhaps was not well equipped, to question that explanation. My going to a temple town for my post graduate studies in no way helped change my position in respect of the supernatural; instead, it strengthened my skepticism.

After becoming a teacher I had several opportunities to be exposed to the wider world of learning far wider than what I had known earlier. Various social movements which were happening around me attracted me and I began to associate myself with them. This coming closer to the people as part of the movements also made me more and more convinced about my positions regarding the supernatural and the so-called hereafter which do not exist. The existential problems could be solved on the basis of what is here and any attempt to look beyond this would only lead one nowhere, I am now convinced.

Having said all this, I should also admit that I have no personal quarrel with the believers. To me, belief in god is a personal matter and one could live with or without it. Very often my ‘believing‘ friends question me as to what I believe in and I say ‘in humans’. Belief, not faith in the religious sense, is needed to make life more meaningful. If one believes in the so called god it may result in finding solace for oneself, but belief in humanity enables one to stand strong on this earth as there is nothing else for one to depend on. What is more, it is this belief in humanity is what brings one nearer to humans and makes one socially responsive and sensitive. The faith that god is the maker of this world has, on various occasions, been used as an alibi to pass the buck on to the unseen and unknown creator. This argument has been used by many to refuse to accept any responsibility for the ills around. God has made us what we are and we cannot go against god’s will they say. In the Indian context at least, this argument has done the worst damage to all human endeavors

at bettering human existence on this earth, Even the oppressed have been taught to accept their miserable condition because they have been made so by god and they have to wait till their next birth for a better life and in the meanwhile serve the those above them. I am convinced that righteousness is independent of your belief or non belief. Religious teachings have not made this world or the humans any better. Even admitting that all religions do encourage the followers to be good, which, however is not always the case, all the people are not paragons of virtue. That is to say, the influence of religion or the idea of god on our moral being is almost negligible. If all the religious teachers, irrespective of the denominations, had been successful in influencing the believers to be GOOD the world would not have been in the state that it is in. Belief in god is the result of ignorance and religion is an attempt at institutionalization of this belief in god. I know my detractors would pounce upon me for saying this, but that is what I believe firmly.

The so called holy books or scriptures are more venerated than studied and understood. They are said to be the guiding lights for the followers for ages and, it is claimed that since many of them were ‘revelations’ they can not be questioned. Any attempt at questioning religious precepts is heresy since by questioning the revealed truth one is questioning the very power or the very existence of god. It is also claimed that since they are revealed truths they are universal and eternal. But while making these tall claims, the religious people forget that these books are also the products of certain times and situations. Any book, religious or secular, is and should be created within the frame work of the times and it is grossly unscientific and illogical to say that these writings are eternal and the precepts are beyond all question. The religious bigotry has done lot of harm to humanity and almost every society in different parts of the world has witnessed the consequences of this dogma.

I have been on various occasions advised to change position regarding god by many people close to me on the ground that there nothing wrong in believing in god. They have also pointed to the examples of individuals who were for a long time atheists and switched over to theism later on. My answer has been that belief in god is neither good nor bad but is only a trait some people may not have. When a human is born, the child is neither a believer nor a non believer, but gradually the belief is thrust on the individual. As he or she grows the mindset continues to get stronger and it becomes a difficult intellectual exercise to shed the beliefs and practices introduced at a very young age. It becomes more a habit of mind or of body than being an integral part of the personality of the individual. It takes lot of conscious effort on one’s part to get out of the shackles of divinity and emerge as a free individual.

Then the examples of people who shift their stand about god need not be taken seriously as there are instances of people growing strong in their non-belief.

I started off thinking of writing why I am an atheist, but I know I have written more about how I became an atheist. This can not but be so. As has already been stated, one is not a theist or an atheist but becomes one. One's being some thing is determined by one's becoming it. I believe this is all the more so in the case of faith, or its absence, in god. I am sure I will continue to be a nonbeliever but continue to observe how this phenomenon called god works on the society. After all, though god is not real, people's faith in the concept is a reality.

■

## Political Economy of the Temple Treasure Trove

*Rajan Gurukkal*

The Supreme Court's order to assess and document the artifacts of the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram is a move towards democratization of knowledge of the treasure.

Equally significant is the Court's appointment of an expert committee headed by the director general of the National Museum for evolving measures to preserve them – a step suggestive of the tacit recognition of the people's right to see the treasure. With no choice left, the Government of India has to come to terms with its constitutional responsibility of preserving the treasure in a museum under the temple with the highest safety measures.

The recently reported treasure trove of the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple, unbelievably huge and valued at tens of thousands of crore, has not been adequately situated in its historical context as yet. Source of Wealth Historically, the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple dates back to the ninth century as one of the 13 Vaishnava shrines sung by Alvars (Vaishnava hymnists). It is relevant to try and recapitulate a bit the antecedents of wealth accumulation in the temple. Like other prominent ones of the period, which had extensive land control along the fertile tracts of wet-rice agriculture, the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple had owned paddy fields and garden lands in a radius of about 30 km, interspersed with crown lands (*cerikkal*) and brahmana lands (*brahmasvam*) from the 10th century. It had become a landed magnate by the 14th century with holdings far and wide along the banks of the Ittikara, Veli, Sithar, Karamana, Neyyar and Kothayar rivers. Unlike other temples, the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple had a lot of forest land rich in spices and commercial crops like cardamom and pepper. The temple had its land redistributed among the members of the landed corporation

(*ettarayogakkar* consisting of eight brahmanas and one Nair chief) who were brahmana landlords with obligations to look after the temple affairs. These landlords had hereditary officials escorted by armed men (*manushyam*) for making periodic exactions from the temple land (*devaswam*).

The crown lands distributed across the landscape from Kallada in present-day Kollam district to Tovala in Kanyakumari district, managed by collateral royal lineages (*swarupams*) such as Kayamkulam, Attingal, Desinganad, Ilayitam, Thrippapur, and Chirava, had often clashed with one another and individually with the temple officials in matters of revenue jurisdiction and exaction. Such clashes had led to attacks on the temple and even the murder of a few servants there, which had sometimes brought capital punishment to the chief offender but invariably ended up with imposition of heavy fines on royal personages by way of expiation. The vast tenant population of the temple-land had to surrender a substantial share of its produce. Traders were indeed a major source of the temple's wealth. All this accounts for the accumulation of wealth in the temple.

### **Marthandavarma**

The ruling lineage of Travancore rose to prominence under the king, Marthandavarma (1729-58), through his conquests of petty chieftains, suppression of big landlords and acquisition of direct control over strategic points like ports, markets and trade routes. Inflicting a historic victory on the Dutch East India Company, on 31 July 1741, at Colechel, he became the first king to have defeated a European power on Asian soil. He got the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple renovated, expanded and made integral to the royal household. The big gateways (*gopura*), the fortifications (*mathil*), the granite structures, and the huge sanctum surrounded by singularly distinct and unique treasure vaults are his political statements in architecture. He ritually placed his extraordinarily expanded kingdom at the feet of Sri Padmanabha and declared himself the deity's servant (Sri Padmanabhadasa), with the vow to rule on his behalf, which makes explicit the lack of structural and institutional means to sustain sovereign control.

The state was yet to structurally and institutionally re-articulate itself by removing the shackles of the feudal order and the traditional strategies of extra-economic coercion. Naturally, the temple wealth and royal assets converged, enabling their preservation in the temple as hidden treasure for security reasons. The royal assets that consisted of gifts from neighbouring kings, forced acquisitions, fines and, fortunes in the form of booty from battles had grown in an unprecedented proportion during the reign of Marthandavarma. The temple

wealth accrued over a few centuries must have certainly involved a lot of gold and silver in artefacts, coins and bullion, purchased using its own income or received as gifts.

### Protection from Plunder

One of the most significant reasons for the long survival of Sri Padmanabha's treasure is the strange immunity to plunder that the temple had enjoyed, ensured by a variety of factors. Both Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, enticed by the great stock of wealth of Travancore, had plans to loot the kingdom. However, the plans never succeeded, thanks to the block put up by the Dutch and the English and the newly acquired prowess of the Travancore Nair militia. The incredible level of inaccessibility, which the hidden vaults, strategically built into the temple architecture with complex locks, camouflages and faith-based checks, has indeed been a major factor in protecting the artefacts. The treasures were concealed in six vaults built around the sanctum sanctorum. All vaults except two were being opened from time to time and hence much of its very precious contents must have vanished into thin air! It is from one of the two long unopened vaults that the treasure trove has been discovered. The sixth vault, the one not opened as yet and supposed to contain the most riches, is *pandaravaka* (vested in the crown), presumably containing the treasure of the Travancore kings. Traditions about the sixth vault, which has been bewilderingly sealed under a concealed lock, say that it is closed for good by a magical snake-knot (*nagabandha*) amenable to untying only by divine souls. The underlying mythical connotation here is that snakes are the celestial custodians of gems, who yield only to the blessed.

### Archaeological Wealth

Irrespective of whether the treasure is vested in the crown or temple or both, it is archaeological wealth accumulated over a few centuries. Any objects of archaeological treasure trove – except for unworked natural objects, or minerals extracted from a natural deposit, or objects otherwise not designated to be of heritage value in India – belong to the nation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the national government whose constitutional prerogative is only to preserve, can turn the objects into cash and spend it, unless enabled to do so through a legislative intervention by Parliament. As such the government can only preserve these objects of immense heritage value.

All presumptions about the original source or owner of the treasure, and prescriptive suggestions about utilisation of the valuables are therefore unwarranted in the case of heritage objects. In India, as per the extant acts, statutes and regulations, the central government has the sole constitutional rights over any potential treasure trove of national heritage value. There is a genealogy of legislations relating to heritage treasure law in the country, starting

with the Indian Treasure-Trove Act, 1878 and the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904. The Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1951, and the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, improved with insertion of constitutional provisions into the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, strengthened by the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, and supplemented by the Antiquities and Art Treasure Rules 1973, all provide for the union government to have monopolistic control over heritage treasures. Nevertheless, people debate on the ways and means of the productive use of the assets for the cause of the poor, provoking heated disputes and controversies.

Understanding the historical making of the treasure is fundamental to its political economy wherein the social structural arrangements for appropriation of the unpaid surplus were central. The treasure is a culturally contingent store of valuables, which in the present case is predominantly stored in the form of gems and gold. Who worked gems and gold artifacts for whom, and what entitled the latter to accumulate them are questions of the political economy of the treasure trove. It is the feudal caste-based social relations of power headed by the king against which we situate the historical making of the treasure that is fundamental to its political economy. These relations represent the social structural arrangement for appropriation of unpaid surplus. It is the structures of control of a proto-state, which account for the accretion of wealth in the form of the temple treasure trove. What the treasure means and how it works today in the national and provincial set-up of a weak capitalist country of uneven development with the persistence of a lot of feudal passions and values are the contemporary political economy questions.

Contemporary political economy has set in with the Supreme Court's order to assess and document the artifacts – a move towards democratisation of knowledge of the treasure. Equally significant is the Supreme Court's appointment of an expert committee headed by the director-general of the National Museum for evolving measures to preserve the treasure – a step suggestive of the tacit recognition of the people's right to see it. With no choice left, the Government of India has to come to terms with the constitutional responsibility of preserving the treasure in a museum under the temple with the highest safety measures, for that is the only legally feasible measure that can reduce the state's burden of providing security cost by generating some money. The Supreme Court's acceptance of the temple's average annual income as Rs 5 crore against the budgeted expenditures of Rs 4 crore and Rs 1 crore for meeting the establishment and maintenance costs respectively, precludes the temple's financial participation in security measures. This means the Government of Kerala has to

meet the cost of security, which it has offered to do. Salaries for watch and ward alone come to Rs 7.5 lakh a month. The Supreme Court's decision, amidst objections from various quarters, to put off the opening of the "magically sealed" and highly mystified sixth vault, till the measures for documentation, categorisation, security, preservation and conservation of the unveiled treasure in the other vaults are complete, and the Court-appointed expert committee's opinion that it requires a year to build up the proposed museum, point to a longer duration over which the state must bear the financial burden of guarding the treasure.

(Courtesy: EPW 19 Nov 2011)



## Nadi Jyotishyam

*Dr. Narendra Nayak*

Nadi Jyotishyam is the name of an 'exact science' by which all details about a person can be told by consulting palm-leaf inscriptions attributed to Agastya Muni, a very famous ancient sage from the South. There is, supposedly, one palm-leaf inscription for every human on this earth, past present and future! Taking into account population explosion, the whole place should be chock full of palm leaves, but miraculously this is not so. This could mean two things- either the ancients had the foresight to know as to who would visit the place and hence only the bio-data of those visitors would be available, or the leaves are preserved in some format wherein terabytes of data could be compressed and stored. The prints would be taken after the candidate arrives on the spot!

Either way it goes to show the remarkable wisdom of our ancients! Anyway, after one arrives at the place their thumb impression is taken along with their date of birth. Then, the palm leaf pertaining to the individual is searched for. This is the source of the name Nadi-search. There are a number of write-ups praising its accuracy and there are blogs testifying to the same. There have been numerous accounts stating that the practitioners of Nadi have an accurate method of telling all about the past, present and future of any individual. All they need for identifying the right leaf is the thumb-print of the person and the date of birth.

On my travels with my friends, we happened to be passing by near where it was supposed that the 'original' Nadi leaves were kept- the Vaithishwara Temple near Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. I decided to look into this matter here, along with Rajendran and Murugan from the Tamil Nadu Science Forum. I decided to follow Rajendra's contact's advice and look for Shiva Swami of station road who was supposedly the best of the lot and would charge only Rs. 500 per consultation.



When we reached the place at the entrance of the village there were numerous signs inviting us to the ‘original nadi jothishyam’, ‘the one and only Nadi consultant’, ‘beware of touds’ [sic] (touts!) etc. On enquiring further, we found out know that the place was full of Shiva Swamis as it seemed to be the most popular name around. Thinking “a rose by any other name...”, we went to the nearest Shiva Swami. This too was probably already entered in my leaf! It was a toud who ended up taking us to this place despite our caution. On entry, we were told that we had come to the right place as it was the place where Agastya Muni had deposited his original collection of palm leaves. We were also told that it was a holy place, a *madam*- a hermitage (not to be confused with madam!), and not a commercial enterprise. On enquiry as to how much it cost, we were informed that it depended on what we wanted. If the interpretations were to be made in Tamil then it would be Rs.200 (~ \$5, US), if translations were to be made it would be more. It would be fifty rupees extra for audio tape recording. I included the condition that the payment would be made only if what was said was correct, and this was agreed upon.

I was told to write my date of birth on a sheet of paper and two thumb impressions of my right hand were taken. That was all that was needed to look for the palm leaf with my life story written on it. It was, however, subject to availability I was told, as I was asked to sit down in a fixed place while the search for it was on. We declined this invitation and told them that we would go around the place and come later. When we came back after ten minutes, we were told that I was lucky as my leaf had been found, and that it would be read. When I asked the permission of the person reading it for it to be photographed, he declined. When I asked whether he would pose for a picture he was vehement in his refusal. Luckily, I had already managed to take a few pictures of the place and its fixtures.

The standard disclaimer was put forth before the reading started. I was told that although all efforts had been made to get the script of my life, there could be some errors in interpretation. So, I had to answer yes or no to statements made about my life.

First I was asked where I came from. When I replied Udupi, he said that had been accurately mentioned in his leaf. The next question was whether I was a Brahmin or not. When I asked what the leaf said, I was told non-brahmin. When I said yes, he made the very earth-shaking declaration that I was a non vegetarian! I asked him to go on and he said that both my parents were alive. Since, both of them are no more, he said that the inference had been probably arrived at, by the presence of their souls on earth! I had made no attempts to send them to heaven by performing the required rituals. I was also informed that my father had been a government servant and had retired. That would have been news to him if he were

alive. He had never worked for anyone else in his lifetime. Then I was told that I too had been in government service and had retired (that last part is not a very difficult conclusion going by my age!) The Pairs of Manipal who had been my employers at Manipal University would be glad to hear of this elevation in their status from an influential family to a government organization. The next statement was about the day of my birth and I was told that I had been born on a Monday and under Makara Rashi. When I replied I did not know whether either of them was true or false, I was told that I am a Muslim!

Then I was told the following:

1. I owned the house in which I live (true) and so did my father (false).
2. I had two wives (I haven't met the second one yet)
3. I had two children from my deceased first wife and for their sake married for the second time. I misled him here saying that my first wife was not deceased, but I had divorced because she had no issue. The children were of my second one. The interpreter of Nadi fell into the trap and agreed with me. He also said that there was a small error in his reading.
4. I had two brothers and one sister. This is true but when I said it was wrong he changed it to one brother and one sister.
5. My father's name starts with one of the dozen alphabets listed. When I said no, he followed with a dozen other alphabets. When I replied in the negative again, he was flabbergasted.

About thirty minutes had passed and getting tired of this, I told the Nadi reader that most of what he had said was nonsense. He got angry at this and told me that I should have been honest with him. I replied that he should have known about this because his own Nadi leaf would have contained the information that his powers would be tested on that day. When I asked him whether I had to pay for all the rubbish that he had told, he flounced out of his own establishment with the Nadi leaves pertaining to my life under his arm, leaving us there. After waiting for a few minutes for him to come back, we came out. By then I had gathered how the so called Nadi fortune tellers manage to make 'accurate predictions' of the past and future.

The leaves are just a prop for them. They are covered in scribbles which only the Nadi reader can supposedly interpret. The information about the client is gathered by the following methods:

- The client and those accompanying them are asked to wait until the proper leaves are found. During this time they are asked to wait in a room which is wired and the conversation is spied upon.
- The interpreter is a clever 'cold-reader'. He notes the reactions of the client and those who accompany them, to check the accuracy of the predictions.

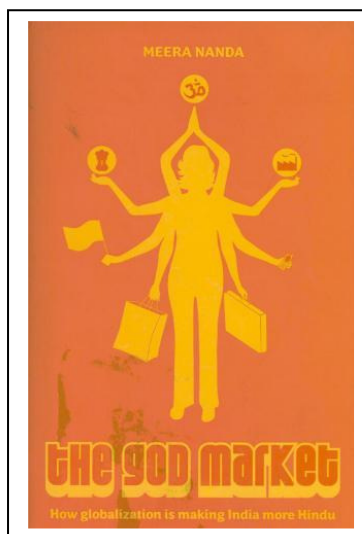
- Pointed questions are asked to ‘predict’ the background of the clients- questions like caste, religion etc.
- Names and other specific details are rooted out by trying to guess the first alphabet of the word followed by the second one and so on by a process of elimination.
- Most of the information is provided by the client from our reactions to yes or no questions or from subconscious body signals.

In my case, since I am quite experienced in providing misleading body signals and since those accompanying me had no knowledge about my personal matters, the reader was not in a position to acquire any knowledge about me by this method, thus playing into the trap. Once the Swami realized that he was being misled and that I was a hard nut to crack, he backed out. So much for the ‘accurate science’ of Nadi Jothishyam

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## God’s Market

*Ajita Kamal*



Ever so often when reading books of non-fiction written by great thinkers you come across one that you find yourself hoping is wrong about the multitude of depressing facts it presents. Line after line, this is the emotion that Meera Nanda’s book, “The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu”, evokes. Beginning with post-independence India, Nanda walks us forward in time, pausing at influential points in the story to build a bullet-proof case for her central assertion that- in her words- “*Globalization has been good to the Gods in India*”. While it is a fast and thoroughly engaging read with all references relegated to the back pages, the sheer quantity of facts is still overwhelming at times.

Since my position on Nanda’s work is familiar to most followers of this website, I will present this review in an unconventional format. I will first describe the structure and content of the book. Then I will present some popular criticisms.

### Overview:

The book has five parts, each part a self-contained thesis from start to finish.

1. After a brief description of neo-liberalism, Nanda breaks down the history of post-independence India into three time periods and takes us through the political and religious events that transpired during these periods. The story begins with creation of the modern

welfare state, the foundation of the democratic process and the emergence of new nationalistic and ideological movements after independence in 1947. After going through a badly bungled experimental phase, neo-liberalism arose as the dominant economic model in India towards the end of the century. To end the chapter, Nanda writes about the privatization of society under the guise of 'swatantra'. She provides evidence to show that "...*privatization is not just turning higher education into a business; it is opening it up to the business of God and god-men as well.*" The ideology of the 'neo-Swatantrites', according to Nanda, is that "*the state has to have a minimal role in economic affairs, but a maximum role in propagation of Hinduism*".

2. In the second section of the book, Nanda explores the alarming increase in religiosity among the middle classes. This is unintuitive, to say the least, but the evidence presented is solid again. Despite the growing affluence and numbers among the middle classes, religion has increased its grip on society in India. Particularly noteworthy is Nanda's assertion that this increased religiosity is more fervent and reactionary than ever before. Nanda borrows a phrase from Neill Macfarland, 'the Rush Hour of the Gods', to describe this growth of religiosity in India in the context of globalization and the resulting economic opportunities and "socio-psychological needs".

Point by point, Nanda builds up her case to show how the new-found religiosity among young urban Indians goes hand in hand with a process of gentrification of the rituals and beliefs, adapting them to the new global economy. There is a new form of Hinduism taking root, one that is as comfortable in the boardroom as it is in the mandir. This section ends with a look at the "new gurus" such as Mata Amritanandamayi, Swami Dayananda, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Swami Ramdev, who have cornered the burgeoning market in techie religiosity.

3. Having built up the case for how both neo-liberalism and religion have come to dominate the current social climate of India, Meera Nanda defends her central thesis in the third section of the book. To do this, she brilliantly adapts her argument from a popular way of describing the co-evolution of two or more mutually dependent institutions. Nanda's term for the resulting collusion between the dominant institutions in India is the "State-Temple-Corporate Complex".

The subject of government involvement in religious affairs is often a cause for contention among the Hindu masses that are led to believe that the government treats Hindus unfairly by targeting them and not the other religions. Nanda's work discredits these arguments. She writes in detail how the current nexus between government and Hindu groups was initiated not by the government, but on the urging of Hindu elites. In essence, not only

have Hindus managed to gain from this relationship that they forced onto the state, but they now use this nexus as propaganda claiming that the government unfairly targets Hindus!

Nanda follows the money trail, discrediting the popular arguments that attempt to portray Hindus as victims of government discrimination. The state-temple-corporate complex is in business, and business is booming. The last few pages of this chapter look at the effects of this union on culture- in particular, education and religious tourism. Nanda portrays an alarming increase in government endorsement, both financially and politically, for numerous religious and religion-related beliefs and practices. She draws examples from around the country to portray this increase in religious influence on education, both in unconventional training schools and in the accredited schools, colleges and universities.

The state-temple-corporate complex has encouraged an amalgam of nationalistic and religious emotions that the masses are drawn towards. Here is a particularly poignant quote from Nanda:

*“Whereas the ‘religions of the book’, that is, Islam and Christianity, bind the faithful by demanding obedience to the letter and the spirit of their revealed dogmas, Hinduism deploys familiar rituals, festivals, myths and observances- the kind of things children learn on their mothers’ knees- to knit a many-stranded rope that binds the faithful to the faith with so many little ties, at so many different points that one loses sight of the ideological indoctrination that is going on. Ordinary worshipers and the three partners described above- the state, the temples, and the corporate or business interests- perform a choreographed dance, as it were, in which each element merges into another smoothly and effortlessly. The net result is a new kind of political and nationalistic Hinduism which is invented out of old customs and traditions that people are fond of, and familiar with.”*

4. In the next chapter, the belief among Indians of our cultural superiority over others is described. Nanda writes *“Indians rank number one in the world in thinking that we are number one in the world”*. This statement is backed by evidence from internationally recognized polls. Meera Nanda presents the data on this subject in the context of group dynamics specific to post-colonial societies that are emerging from poverty. She extends this thought to the Hindutva explanations for the IT revolution, pointing to how Hinduism is now used to justify everything from democracy to the number of science graduates in India. She says, *“A great many computer professionals, important scientists and well-respected intellectuals have bought into this idea that Hinduism predisposes Indians to become great software engineers”*. Nanda places these arrogant notions of Hindu superiority beside objective measures of India’s science and engineering accomplishments, demonstrating that the numbers tell a completely different story.

The last part of this chapter is concerned with the development of what Nanda calls the “Theology of Hatred”. Here she describes the “intellectual warriors” of the Hindutva

army as resorting to “designer fascism”, whereby they claim tolerance of other religions while claiming that this tolerance arises due to the virtues of Hinduism alone. There is a powerful movement of Hindu intellectuals, such as those behind the Voice of India publishing house, who have made an art out of Hindu triumphalism while presenting Islam and Christianity as outsiders to be feared and challenged. Nanda closes the chapter with an appeal to celebrate the secular achievements of India as progress that was made independent of Hindu influence.

5. The final section of the book is concerned with global trends in religiosity and secularism. After presenting examples to demonstrate that religious influence has increased and not decreased over the past half-century of free-markets and globalization, Nanda gets down to pinning down the nature of secularism as a cultural institution. There are, she points out, differences in the Indian view of secularism. She places India’s struggle with religion in the context of this global trend towards increased religiosity and decreased secularization, and asks the reader to step back and try to understand how the two forces of globalization and secularization have affected each other in their evolution.

Quoting Peter Berger, whom she also quotes in other places in the book, Nanda shows that religion and the state are competitors for cultural capital. As reason begins to assert itself in a society, leading to more influence by the state over civilian activities that were once controlled by religion, the religiosity of the people also falls over time. Conversely, by the removal of the powers of the state towards influencing culture an available niche is created for religion to fill. Over and over Nanda points out, using Berger’s work, how this new surge in religion is actually of the supernatural kind, not the more benign rational form commonly associated with globalization.

Nanda presents an analysis of the correlation between religiosity and economic conditions, mentioning studies that show clearly how the most religious societies are either extremely poverty stricken or are the most unequal in terms of their wealth distribution, thus creating an underclass ripe for religious indoctrination. She writes about supply-side theory, which states that in the global market religions will compete and there will be new religious movements- a boom and bust cycle of religious beliefs. Nanda presents evidence from a larger scale model that overrides the smaller market trends and shows that a steady long-term decline of religion is feasible if the cultural need for supernatural beliefs fades away. Nanda closes by laying out the implications of the models of secularization theory on India, with an appeal towards building a secular future.

*“There is no bigger challenge for India today than to create meaningful secular spaces and a secular public culture”*

**Criticism:**

There is much criticism of Meera Nanda from all denominations of educated Indian society. I will list a few here.

1. Hindu Hater: Nanda is often accused of focusing only on Hindus and allowing other religious groups to get off easy. This accusation is meant to preclude intelligent conversation, even when it is advanced by the Western ‘showcase intellectuals’ who are often placed on the front lines to defend Hinduism. Nevertheless, Nanda has stated previously why her focus is on Hinduism. Hers are not unlike the reasons why a Pakistani secularist would likely direct the bulk of his or her ire at Islam, or an Italian freethinker at Catholicism.
2. Christian/Islamic Apologist: When people perceive things as black or white, they are likely to place others in one of those two categories. There may be something in the religious mind that prevents such people from understanding the merits of reaching for objective thought, free of cultural bias.
3. Islam is so much worse than Hinduism: This argument makes the fallacy of irrelevance, or simply, it is a red herring.
4. Nanda is Anti-Business: No, she is not. The prevalence of this accusation is evidence for a populist reactionism against Nanda’s work. Nanda’s positions on economics are reflective of one who calls for measured use of the potential for competition in business, in order to create innovation and progress in society. In the book, she criticizes the Indira Gandhi administration’s top-down policies, making it clear that she believes that by that stage of development, at that time in history, the government should have ceded some areas of industry that were under its control to be developed further by regulated private enterprise. India, she states, was ready for business. The work done through the Nehru years had created enough local infrastructure to begin privatization.
5. She sees all Hindus as Right-Wing Ideologues: In the book, Nanda catalogs the evolution of the Hindutva movement beginning with the foundations of the philosophy of *Integral Hinduism* when the prevailing mood within the movement was suspicious of both the state as well as the capitalist system, to today where Hindus have figured out ways of exploiting the current right-of-center political climate. There were left-leaning philosophical underpinnings in the beginning, and perhaps some remain, but the driving force today is the god market.

There are many other arguments raised against Nanda’s work by a particular online contingent. The religious and superstitious IT community that Nanda comes down on in her book are not exactly her biggest fans. Internet message boards, blogs and forums are filled

with right-wing Hindutva hate speech directed at Nanda. Much of their criticism is not worth addressing individually. None of the criticism addresses Nanda's evidence. This is quite understandable since, after all, there is no arguing against demonstrable facts. Much of the comments on these sites are studies in logical fallacies, containing everything from ad hominen attacks to straw-men arguments and ad absurdum reasoning. The motivation to defend their religion is so strong in these people that they do not, for an instant, let reason get in their way.

Another group of people who are highly insulted by Nanda's thesis is the section of the rationalist community that is ideologically pro-globalization- unapologetically so, even in the face of evidence that a balanced approach is needed in certain areas of social and economic health. Very often I have seen comments from such folk attacking Nanda's thesis simply because it offends their aesthetic sensibilities. They often contend that it could not possibly be true that free-markets have actually increased religiosity in India. It seems too obvious to them that, since they have come to reason through the internet (and cultural globalization), reason must be the beneficiary of any such socio-economic development model. Often such folks, even rationalists, will not even take the time to actually read the arguments and check the evidence, preferring to further advance their confirmation bias by deliberately ignoring that which makes them uncomfortable.

**Conclusion:**

Meera Nanda's book is an eye opener for any Indian who values human rights, science, and secularism and wishes to advance these in India. The rationalist movement, despite the herculean efforts of a dedicated few, has been floundering in the sea of religious belief that surrounds it. Nanda's work needs to be read and discussed in rationalist settings around the country, with a view towards developing strategies that are in tune with the vastly different world in which religions operate today. With this book, Nanda joins the likes of Romila Thapar as someone who speaks the unblemished truth about our country in the face of much public resentment. "The God Market" is a testament to Meera Nanda's ability to cut through the noise and tell us the story, the complete story, and how it relates to what she has not yet begun to speak of.





## Can we really be sure the Paranormal is Bunkum?

*Michael Hanlon*

Like most people who consider themselves to be rational beings, I have a long hate list of tiresome beliefs, notions and lifestyles which I reckon consign a person to the dark side. This list includes the following:

- all religions, whether organized or utterly chaotic
- astrology, spoon and other alleged demonstrations of psychic powers such as telepathy
- any manifestation of the New Age, including talk of *chakras*, channelling, crystals and chanting
- the ‘wisdom of the East’ and the ‘wisdom of the Ancients’
- the healing power of whale music
- aromatherapy, rebirthing and reincarnation
- alternative medicine, especially homeopathy and really especially homoeopathy
- essential oils
- anything Ayurvedic or involving gurus
- ghosts, fairies and, far worse, faeries

Collectively all this stuff brings me out in a rash. Indeed, I suspect that the barstool question ‘What star sign are you?’ is an excellent Darwinian adaptation hardwired into the mating strategies of the deluded to provide a signal to sensible folk to keep clear and protect the gene pool.

In my world view (and in the world view of most people I know and love who are all, of course, sensible right-thinking people like me) this is all gibberish, wishful thinking by people who are not interested in finding out how wonderful the world really is and who wish instead to replace it with a garish, Disneyfied version where there are fairies (or faeries) at the bottom of every garden and a big, kind man in the sky to watch out for our every move.

I was especially pleased to learn from a psychology professor once that a belief in things like astrology and mysticism is hugely correlated with a highly conservative right-wing outlook on life generally. Great, I thought. These kooks are not only talking gibberish, they are a bunch of Nazis as well. It’s therefore more than all right to hate them, it is almost a duty.

Here is another list, this time of things I do believe in:

- huge stars which collapse in on their own weight and at whose centres there are maybe portals to another universe
- the possibility that an infinite number of parallel universes exist, each containing every possible permutation in the history of time. I believe it is just about possible that out there, there is not only a universe where Al Gore became President of the US in 2000, but an unhappier place where Hitler won the Second World War.
- objects like electrons and maybe even whole atoms can be in two places at once
- when you put a stopwatch on an airliner and fly it over the Atlantic the act of accelerating this object to a few hundred miles per hour will make it run very slightly slow
- the Universe began in a stupendous explosion of space, matter and perhaps time as well, and we have managed to find a date, around 13.7 billion years ago, when this event occurred
- the Universe is full of a strange invisible substance which completely fails to make its presence felt save through its gravitational attraction to ordinary matter. I am quite prepared also to believe in an even more mysterious, monstrous dark force that looks like it might one day rip everything apart

So what is it that differentiates the first set of beliefs from the second? What makes the second lot ‘scientific’ and the first lot ‘mumbo jumbo’? Why is belief in homeopathy silly and yet belief in string theory completely sensible and mainstream? Why do you get Nobel Prizes for working in one set of these fields and derision for working in the other?

The answer gets to the heart of what science is. The rejection of ‘flaky’ beliefs like *chakras* and homeopathy is not because these things are intrinsically strange, or even spooky. After all, quantum physicists have performed experiments which have shown that two electrons can send ‘messages’ to each other thousands of times faster than light. Any explanation for this ‘entanglement’ involves hypotheses like sending messages back in time, which is far, far spookier than homeopathy.

No, science does not reject certain beliefs because they sound flaky, but because they have been examined by experiment and found wanting. The scientific method says that you have an idea, and test whether it is true. Belief— except in the veracity of this method - does not, or should not, come into it. And time and time again, when science has tried to verify things like homeopathy or the existence of telepathy, it has failed. The ‘proof’, if there is any, for the phenomena on the first list depends hugely upon anecdote. And anecdotal evidence, while not always entirely worthless, is generally the enemy of reason.

But we must be careful here. It is tempting to dismiss a whole set of beliefs - indeed a whole belief system - purely on the basis of prejudice rather than on evidence. And it is far too easy to link one set of beliefs (for which there is no evidence) with another (for which

there might be) simply because they sound a bit similar and tend to have the same devotees. People who ‘believe’ in crystal therapies and *chakras* often also believe in acupuncture and telepathy. And while there is zero evidence that the first two are real, there is quite a lot of evidence that acupuncture ‘works’, and some evidence for telepathy.

Believers in the paranormal often point out that science is quite prepared to believe in stuff that is not only spooky (like entanglement) but also stuff for which there is very little experimental evidence.

They have a point. Take string theory, the idea that at its heart the Universe is composed of countless tiny vibrating threads made of, perhaps, space—time. Each is tuned to a different harmony, creating the electrons, quarks, neutrinos and so on of which we are made. It is a beautiful theory, and, at least in its very broadest concepts, quite a simple one, and if there is one thing that science has taught us it is that the simplest answer is very often the right one. But is it right?

Mathematically, string theory (I am told) pretty well has all its ducks in a row. When I met Lisa Randall, the Harvard University physicist and evangelist for string theory as the best possible candidate we have for a prototype theory of every thing, she certainly impressed me with her passion. People like Randall live in a mental world upon which we can only gaze in awe. Who on earth are we to doubt them?

But some people with far more mental equipment at their disposal than I do doubt all this. String theory has, so far, absolutely no observational or experimental evidence to back it up. Already there is something of an anti-string theory backlash. The problem with string theory, say the sceptics, is that it is fundamentally un-testable, and that makes it fundamentally Not Science. Because to expose particles on this scale and study them we will need to build atom-smashing machines two or three orders of magnitude more powerful than any thing we have mooted so far.

And the scepticism about the New Weird Science doesn’t stop there. Parallel universes are an elegant solution to two large scientific dilemmas: the resolution of quantum events and the problem of explaining why the Universe seems to be so finely tuned for life. And yet, like those strings, we have absolutely no empirical evidence that there are universes out there where Hitler won the war or where another you is reading Astrology for Cats right now.

Part of the reason that string theory and, say, homeopathy have been put in separate boxes is of course the personalities involved. The people working on string theory, like the people working on dark matter and the people trying to fathom the nature and possible cause of the Big Bang are proper scientists, proper people in fact, clearly highly intelligent and with years of training behind them.

They submit their findings to respected journals where their peers mercilessly rip their work to shreds, trying to find fault and any evidence of error or fraud. Their hunches, hypotheses and theories are testable and fallible and their experiments repeatable, and that is what makes them proper scientists, not charlatans.

Some of these people become stars, write best-selling books and make a great deal of money, but most do not. Some are impossible egoists every bit as queenly as the worst showbiz diva. But again, most are not. The majority of top-end scientists I have met, even Nobel Prize winners, are surprisingly unassuming people, and perhaps a majority of them find the fame which may be unwittingly thrust upon them embarrassing and hard to deal with.

Compare these people with the other lot. They often wear silly clothes and spout unfathomable gibberish, and their most successful proponents seem to worship both fame and money a great deal. Little training is required to set oneself up as an astrologer, faith healer or spoon-bender, just a ‘gift’, some charm, a thick skin and a snappy personality. These people often react very badly when asked to put their findings or qualifications up for serious scrutiny, and they often reach for their lawyers at the suggestion that they may be mistaken in their beliefs.

The work of these people is helped greatly by the strange, modern climate of scepticism, indeed cynicism, of all things scientific, a rejection of ‘modern thinking’ and indeed, implicitly (although it is never quite put like this) of the whole Enlightenment project.

Finally, there is the unalterable fact that, historically, much of even the edgiest science turns out to be right. It sounds as silly to believe that a pocket watch on an airliner runs slow as it does to believe that the position of the planet Neptune when you were born may influence your career and choice of partner, but the fact is that we can measure the former very accurately with atomic timepieces, and it does indeed turn out to be the case that fast-moving clocks runs slow. And it also turns out that the position of Neptune has, statistically, no influence at all on the course of your life.

Similarly, the notion of dark matter sounds absurd until you realize that with some very elaborate and expensive telescoper and computer you can actually see the gravitational shadow of this stuff writ large in the heavens. No one has ever got a paper in *Nature* based on their spoon bending powers or their ability to predict the future.

And yet. There is a danger here that we are creating a false dichotomy, an unnecessary barrier between the logical and the absurd that is really a barrier between two different mindsets than between the real and the unreal. Strange, impossible, weird and even spooky things are OK as long as they are ‘scientific’, but not if they are just spooky. Quantum action at a distance is all right; ghosts are not. Quantum consciousness is worthy of debate, telepathy is beyond the pale. NASA employs scientists to ponder the existence of microbes on Mars, yet to believe seriously in UFOs is to stray well into nutter-dom and certainly will count against you if you are going for a job with the Agency.

While we can all agree that crystal therapy and channeling are almost certainly nonsense of the first order, what about hypnotism and acupuncture? Can we really be so sure that all this stuff, the stuff of the loonies, the credulous and the fraudulent, should be thrown away with the mystic and astrological bathwater?

Do we need to think a bit more carefully about exactly where we place our Great Wall between the rational and the absurd and even allow for the fact that sometimes that wall may need to be given a few gaps?

Fundamentalists would say that giving airtime to any of this stuff is an abomination. I remember hearing a very distinguished British thinker saying on the radio a few years ago that even if it could be shown, beyond all reasonable doubt, that telepathy was real, he would still want nothing whatsoever to do with it. Such a discovery, he said, would be trivial and unimportant. It would tell us little that we didn’t already know about the brain and the mind, how the world works and how we fit into it.

Well, I am sorry, but this will not do. As the Nobel Prize-winning physicist and paranormal sympathist Brian Josephson says, this is a ‘pathological disbelief.., a statement which says “even if it were true I wouldn’t believe it”.

It is certainly the case that if it could be shown, for example, that telepathy works it really would change an awful lot. If we discovered that brains are able to communicate, through empty space, directly and without the intermediary of spoken language, then this alone would tell us a great deal about human consciousness, the mind, and the transmission

of information. Obviously I have no idea how telepathy works, if it does (which I doubt), but that is not the point. Maybe it would involve some sort of quantum spookery, maybe some sort of electrical field.

According to Richard Wiseman, a British psychologist who has spent many years studying and commenting upon parapsychology, the discovery that any of this stuff is real would be hugely important:

*It would not be a small change to our scientific model of the world if astrology, ESP or ghosts were genuine. It would be a radical shift. That is why these topics make many scientists instantly say that these things cannot be true. We must remember that about half the public believe in these things and so they are deserving of investigation from that perspective alone.*

*Science is in the business of testing ideas, torturing them, wringing every last possible anomaly out and hanging them to dry. If you prove that something is right, that isn't good enough. You have to show everyone else what you have done and they must repeat your experiments and get the same results. Only then has knowledge advanced.*

*Can any of this rigour be applied to the paranormal? Well yes, actually. Parapsychology is the name given to a group of (so far) hypothetical phenomena which include extrasensory perception (ESP), telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, remote viewing, telekinesis, psychic healing and morphic fields.*

What these phenomena have in common is that they are, at least in principle, testable. And since the 1890s there have indeed been concerted efforts made to find out whether these are real, in controlled conditions, in the lab. Some of these experiments, where people sit in sealed rooms and try to transmit images on cards — circles, squares, wavy lines and so on to another volunteer in another sealed room, have- become quite famous.

So far the results have been rather muddled. Some individual studies have shown some sort of statistically significant effect (i.e. the 'receivers' were getting the 'right' answer far more often than would be expected simply by chance), but the sceptics point out that if you do a 'study of studies', if you look at dozens or hundreds of individual attempts to 'find psi' the interesting results disappear in a puff.

It is fair to say that no investigation into telepathy has yet produced results which have convinced the scientific main stream that there is any kind of interesting effect going on here. The parapsychologists meanwhile maintain that such meta-studies instead reinforce the certainty that something interesting is going on.

Perhaps the most ‘successful’ of the ESP tests are the ‘Ganzfeld’ experiments, which were first conducted in the 1970s. Volunteer ‘receivers’ are put into a state of near sensory deprivation, in a soundproof room with translucent spheres placed over their eyes, bathed in red light and with white noise played through headphones. The idea is to create a ‘changeless sensory experience’, fully open to any telepathic signals, should they be there.

There are several variations in the methodology, but basically the receiver is asked to rank a series of images in terms of how well they correspond to ‘signals’ sent by a ‘transmitter’ in a sealed room. According to experimenters, overall Ganzfeld trials have shown the existence of psi effects beyond all reasonable doubt — one figure quoted is that you would expect results such as have been obtained to have occurred by chance only one in 29 quintillion times.

Since then, however, meta-analyses of Ganzfeld experiments, by Richard Wiseman and others have apparently shown no such effect. There have been allegations of experimental error and irregularities. Perhaps most importantly, the assumption that any statistical anomaly must be due to a mysterious psi effect has been challenged; maybe telepathy is at work, but maybe there is a hitherto unsuspected error in the experimental protocol.

Experiments are done, and results argued over, and parapsychology as a whole goes in and out of fashion. A hundred years ago it was reasonably respectable, with even Darwin’s great protégé Alfred Russel Wallace having a thorough dabble. Then, as the 20th century dawned, an extreme, rationalist mindset took hold and any sort of psi research became seriously beyond the pale.

And after that, came the ESP experiments and now, finally, the new scepticism. It is true that several respectable universities now have departments and research bodies devoted to parapsychology, but despite this the whole field is still tainted by its associations with the charlatans and frauds who perpetrated the spiritualist movements of Victorian times. To some, this has led to irrational prejudice. Brian Josephson has accused mainstream journals such as *Nature* and *Science* of effectively censoring any papers on telepathy, telekinesis and so on. Put it this way: expressing an interest in psi effects won’t see the research grants flooding in.

Scientists have a natural inclination to distrust ideas that are outside their canon of knowledge. There is a sense that parapsychology is partly ‘owned’ by people outside the traditional field of psychology, for instance. This may explain a remarkable and enlightening

finding that came in 1979, when a survey of more than a thousand American college professors found that a majority (55%) of natural scientists, a large majority (66% of social scientists) and a huge majority (77%) of arts professors were prepared to accept that ESP was at least a possibility worth studying. The only group which expressed extreme scepticism were the psychologists (only 34%), and a similar number said that ESP was an impossibility, a view taken by only one in 50 scientists generally.

In a paper published in 1994 in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*, entitled ‘Does psi exist? Replicable evidence for an anomalous process of information transfer’, Daryl Bern and Charles Honorton had this to say about these figures:

We psychologists are probably more sceptical about psi for several reasons. First, we believe that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. And although our colleagues from other disciplines would probably agree with this dictum, we are more likely to be familiar with the methodological and statistical requirements for sustaining such claims, as well as with previous claims that failed either to meet those requirements or to survive the test of successful replication. Even for ordinary claims, our conventional statistical criteria are conservative. The sacred  $p = .05$  threshold is a constant reminder that it is far more sinful to assert that an effect exists when it does not (the Type I error) than to assert that an effect does not exist when it does (the Type II error).

This amounts to a defence of psychological scepticism. Richard Wiseman adds:

*Psychologists have carried out lots of work showing that people are often driven by their beliefs when they evaluate evidence, rather than being more rational. Also, they obviously carry out work with people, rather than with chemicals, and so are used to people cheating, not telling the whole truth and so on. As such, I think they are more aware than most of how evidence for an effect may be due to human deception and self-deception.*

In other words, psychologists work in a world where people lie a lot. Physicists do not. This makes physicists a bit more gullible.

In their paper ‘Biological utilization of quantum non-locality’, published in *Foundations of Physics* in 1991, Brian Josephson and Fotini Pallikari-Viras cautiously floated the idea of the phenomenon of quantum entanglement, which Einstein famously dismissed as ‘spooky action at a distance’ as a possible mechanism for telepathy.

It is no surprise that the known strangenesses of the quantum world have often been cited as a possible (perhaps the only possible) explanation for various paranormal effects from ESP to the phenomenon of consciousness itself. The Oxford physicist Roger Penrose



has suggested that microscopic structures inside the brain, microtubules (which are in fact found in all cells), may be able to make use of quantum effects to produce the non-deterministic effects of self-awareness and free will, a view dismissed by many of his peers as twaddle.

In brief, Josephson and Pallikari-Viras say that it is not impossible that the existence of ‘remote influences’ suggested by quantum theory (where, say, the quantum state of an object like an electron or photon, say its spin, or polarization, may correlate over arbitrarily large distances after they have been split apart) may indicate that the same effect could lie behind the direct connection of minds (telepathy) and between mind and matter (telekinesis).

As to an actual mechanism, the authors accept that invoking quantum effects in a macroscopic structure like the brain is stretching credulity, but that it is quite plausible that during the long evolution of life on Earth natural selection has, in effect, tamed the quantum world to use its properties for its own purpose.

A grand interconnectedness between all life-forms is invoked, a sort of super-Jungian mega-consciousness. Today, Brian Josephson says the idea that we will have to ‘throw away science’ if we accept the reality of some psychic phenomena is a woolly argument, nonsense. Fundamental physics may have to change a bit to include the mind but it is not true to say it would all have to go. When new findings come along in science it is rarely the case that all previous beliefs have to be overturned.

But the question remains: why should we take this seriously? After all, what is the difference between telepathy and the tooth fairy? It may be hard or even impossible to prove that these phenomena are not real, but what is the point of wasting time, energy and money investigating things which are probably marginal at best and very probably no more than a figment of our collective imaginations?

Well, for a start, even if we never do uncover evidence of psychic ability, by carrying out experiments into ‘ESP’ we are quite likely to find out a lot of interesting things about the psychology of the self and of deception. That alone makes this work worthwhile.

More fundamentally, parapsychology is a ‘real’ phenomenon if only in the way that so many people perceive it as so. Some sort of voiceless communication has been reported by human societies across all cultures and apparently across all times in history. Most cultures report instances where individuals are able to make contact with other individuals instantaneously and across great distances.

I think the interesting thing about this is that although the telepathy experience is quite common, it is by no means universal and when it is reported it seems to be a pretty marginal effect. In a way, it is easier to dismiss beliefs such as the afterlife and the various deities, simply because such beliefs are so universal (and hence accepted and unquestioned).

Simple psi effects seem to be rare, and have always been thought of as something rather special and probably quite dubious. They also seem to be free of political, religious or emotional overtones. For what it is worth, I do not believe that telepathy and other related psi effects are real, or at least I do not believe that I have been shown anything to convince me that they are real, but I have no reason to believe with any certainty that they are not.

What about the rest of the paranormal? Well, it is possible to construct a sort of ‘league of looniness’, with the most plausible bits at the top and the most foam-flecked reaches at the bottom. At the top I suppose would be what the high priest of rationalism Richard Dawkins has recently dubbed the ‘pen normal’. Here we find hypnosis and maybe acupuncture, both now, following solid clinical trials, largely accepted to be real, although mysterious, phenomena. Would he include telepathy? The sneer could be heard down the telephone line. ‘Almost certainly not’. Then the aforementioned classic psi phenomena — telepathy, remote seeing, perhaps telekinesis. Evidence for these being real is debated and hugely controversial. But compared to the next lot this is practically Newtonian physics.

Enter stage left here a curious, mostly North American, phenomenon called Intercessory Prayer (IP). This is faith healing, an unholy fusion of parapsychology, mysticism and traditional religion. In IP studies the effect on sick people or volunteers praying to God for their recovery is measured. (It never seems to be the case, puzzlingly, that the volunteers are asked to pray for a worsening in the patients’ condition. although in the interests of scientific correctness surely this should be so.) Several IP studies have been published showing an effect. For example, in 2001 Leonard Leibovici of the Rabin Medici Center in Israel had a paper published in the British Medical Journal in which he claimed that a group of patients with blood infections did slightly (but statistically significant slightly) better than those who were not prayed for. Studies the US have ‘shown’ small but significant effects on patients recovering after heart attacks and surgery.

IP studies are naturally hugely controversial. Why, many scientists argue, should money - sometimes public money - be used to fund such a flaky area of research and one so cultural specific? The idea of IP raises shudders outside the US Protestant heartland. And a lot of religious people are unhappy also; the idea that their God would choose to intervene to

help some people and not others simply on the basis of a medical trial seems to undermine any commonly held views of an all-loving and just deity.

UFOs come next. Almost, but not entirely, implausible, the idea that Earth is being visited by alien spacecraft probably belongs in the same groupthink as IP and the kookier end of ESP. The arguments for and against UFOs are well worn, and not worth repeating here, except the one which says that if it were definitely and provably the case that no alien had ever visited Earth in a flying saucer (which it never could be) it would also most definitely be the case that once humanity had come up with the notion of aliens then flying saucers would sooner or later be seen.

Homeopathy? Nah. You can do double-blind trials - they have done double blind trials - and there is no effect (save perhaps a rather interesting placebo effect).

Reincarnation? What is the point? We are now on the ever steepening and slippery slope that leads down into the intellectual dark side. 'Proper' religion probably belongs in its own category, perhaps a rival league, a bit like the two rival codes in rugby football.

Finally, it seems that a line must be drawn. Not a solid one, but a broken and permeable barrier between the acceptable and unacceptable. Richard Dawkins is probably being too fierce here, but his idea is a good one. Accept, grudgingly and with a certain amount of kicking and screaming, paranormal (alt right: 'peranormal') phenomena into the scientific fold if and when there is overwhelming evidence that there is some thing here worth studying.

The paranormal is, probably, bunkum. Most of it, most of the time. But around the fringes it is just possible that science is starting to investigate something that is as hugely and deeply interesting as the wildest phenomena in the new physics and the new cosmology. If we are prepared to believe in dark matter, multidimensional hyperspace, dark energy and naked singularities before breakfast, I don't think a little telepathy should be too hard to swallow.

Courtesy: Excerpts from his Book:  
*10 Questions science can't answer (yet)*



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# THOUGHT & ACTION

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## Temples: A Gigantic Market

*Uday Nirgudkar*

What is the biggest market of India? There will be a wide range of answers, from telecom to agriculture or from steel to basic services and each answer will have several justifications; such as massive turnover, pace of development, manpower and employment, national interest or its moorings in the Indian mode of life. None of the above markets-steel, telecom, etc.-will fulfill all the above at once, to be entitled the 'biggest market'. The biggest market fulfilling all these criteria is in fact, the market of the temples! Here, 'temple' includes a Jain Mandir, a Gurudvara of the Sikhs, Churches, Masjids and the prayer houses of many religions and sects.

Unbelievable? Then take a calculator and begin the exercise. There are 620,000 villages in India each with at least four temples. Then come the five thousand 'type C' towns with a population of 500 and minimum ten temples in each. Next we have the slightly bigger type 'C' towns counting about a thousand and having a minimum of 100 temples each. At the apex, there are six megacities in India with at least 1000 temples each. This accounts only for the Hindu religion. The number increases by 25% when you account for the prayer houses of all the other religions and sects. Now, all of these together, account for only the retail turnover. There are many wholesale traders in this business, such as the self-proclaimed Maths (monasteries), Ashrams, and Akhadas (hubs of religious sects). In addition to all the above retail and wholesale traders, there are a plethora of foundations and societies that claim to lead the common man to God through Yoga or to Samadhi through carnal enjoyment, etc. Can you, now, with the help of your calculator gauge the enormity of this gigantic market?

There is another dimension to be considered and that is the amount of man-hours consumed in this trade. Whenever a devotee visits a temple, church or a mosque, he is bound to spend at least half an hour there, whether there is peace and calm or noise and din over there. Some of them have more than 50000 devotee- visitors every day. Every Tuesday, for example, in the Siddhivinayak Mandir in Mumbai, about 70000 devotees are sure to visit. Over and above these daily visits, there are occasions like festivals, Palakhi (procession of a deity or a saint in a palanquin), Paduka, Prakatadeen (the day of manifestation), fairs, etc. when the crowds are enormous. These occasions we may ignore for the time being. Now, nobody will object if I state that every temple in this country, on an average, is visited by at least 500 devotees. Let us now multiply the number of temples that we counted earlier, by 500. Do our telecom, shipping, computer and other industries have so many customers as compared with the number of devotee-customers visiting temples? If you want to find out man-hours spent in this trade, multiply the number of devotee-customers with half an hour, i.e. by 30 minutes, the average time spent by a devotee in the temple. Can any other trade beat this number of man-hours spent?

Again when we talk of turnover, every devotee must be giving away at least a rupee and much more if he wants to offer special pooja, Abhishek, etc. or buying something from the unkempt shops near the temple, then that makes it the largest turnover than any other sector in this country. I am certain no one will raise the issue of its being linked with social life and sentiments. No doubt the temples have given the society enormous emotional satisfaction and peace of mind; but at the same time, the fact remains that the same temples have caused equally horrendous turmoil and terror in the society.

Now, before examining the criterion of scale of development let us just think of the huge ever increasing queues outside the temples or the mosques, wherein lies the answer. Increase in the number of industries, factories, laboratories and nuclear power plants are matched by the increase in Maths, Ashrams and temples. So, it's an ever-growing market. The queues outside the temples consist of old people as well as youngsters, both men and women along with their kids. Some of them are beset with problems while others, having solved their problems, come there for thanksgiving and fulfilling their vows. There are politicians, sportspersons, Boliwood stars, criminals, page one and page three celebrities, highly educated as well as illiterates, scoundrels and gentlemen, teetotalers and drug addicts. The queues of the devotees consist of all types of people- those who can afford and those who cannot; villagers and urbanites. Is there any market other than the temple where real, astounding diversities co-exist in unity?

The telecom revolution that is taking place here is amazing. The uneducated ignorant Indians are buying a mobile phone at the rate of one mobile per second! But still more amazing is the fact that the temples have been able to maintain their market leadership. So the biggest market that reaches their products and services to the largest number of people is not owned by any company like the Tatas, Birlas or the Ambanis; it is owned by the very God who does or does not exist. So this 'all time market leader' god, not the one without attributes and form but the one with attributes and perfections, confronts us in many places and many forms - in village after village, small lanes and narrow roads, every town and city-manifesting himself in the idols of the temples and gives joy and satisfaction to the devotees. List of such idols-gods with attributes and forms-enshrined in temples is enormous.

To list just a few, in Gujarat at Dwaraka, Somnath, Akshardham, Bhadreshwar, Ambaji, Sankeshwar, etc.; in Sikkim Hanuman Tok, in Guwahati Kamakshi, Mahabhairava in Tejapur, Baijanath of Kaisohi, in Uttaranchal, Hidimba mandir of Manali, Sheetaldevi at Gurgaon, Parashuram Kund in Arunachal, the temple of Govindaji in Manipur, down south in Andhra Pradesh Shrishailya, mukhalingam, Gunupudi, in nearby Goa-Mangeshi, Shantadurga, Mahalakshmi, Bhagavati, Chandeshwar, in Karnataka Virupaksha, Chamundeshwar, Channkeshar, the Mahamaya of Chattisagada, Shuddha Mahadev of Panipat, in Mumbai the Siddhivinayak, Mumbadevi and Babulnath. Further on in Maharashtra we have Ghrineshwar, Ashtavinayak, eleven Marutis,

Pandharpur, Tulajapur, Shirdi, Shanishinganapur, and Ganagapur. In Rajasthan there is the Sasbahu temple of Udaypur, Govindadevaji of Jaipur, The kali and Ramkrishna Mission Mandir of Bengal, besides the famous Kashivishvanatha, Haradwar, Vaisnodevi, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Thirupati and yes, how we can forget Ayodhya! All these god manifestations are just those that cater for the Hindus. Now think of the Christians' Basilica, Saint Cathedral of Goa; Saint Michel of Simla, Velankani from Nagapattanam and several mosques and Dargas of the Muslims. Devotional seats the Muslims' are Haji Ali in Mumbai, Jama Masjid of Dilly, Jumma Masjid of Vijapur, Ajmer's Sharif, etc. There are many well known Jain Mandirs like those at Jaisalmer, Varangal, Ajitanath, Mahsana, Gomateshwar, Chaubishi and Patna. The prayer houses of Buddhas are innumerable, e.g. those at Gaya, Ajantha, Sanchi, Sarnath, Bomdila, Tavang and Rumtek. To add to this unending list are temples and prayer houses of the umpteen sects and religions prevailing in India.

As per the principle of marketing the customers must feel the need for your product; your product will not be sold till then. But once you are convinced that your product does fulfill some felt need of theirs, you have won the game. In this market of devotion, faith is the greatest need. Every human being needs to hang on to some faith or other. To fulfill this need he will, willy-nilly, go to a temple and try to relate to the divine power of his god, who may or may not exist. All this is but natural. Many of those who regularly visit temples believe as much in their own efforts as they do in fate and destiny. Yet they are innocent, trusting devotees and willingly become devotee-consumers. As they go to the temple and stand stooping before their god with folded hands and closed eyes, they get spiritual satisfaction and delight. They feel energized and elated. Whether they really gain energy or they imagine to have gained it, is their own problem but the feeling of piety and spiritual delight cannot be overlooked; it has its own value. They can then 'leave everything to Him' and stand up again to face the difficulties of life with renewed energy, which is otherwise quite difficult. It is not easy especially because repeatedly year after year 'leaving everything to Him' does not reduce the drudgery of life even one bit; on the contrary it keeps increasing. With all this, the mind first stoops humbly and then springs up again to fight another battle. In one sense the god-the great market leader - and his service work like a psychiatrist, whether he is the Bhairoba of Adgaon or the Dagadusheth Ganapati and the Siddhivinayak of the elite.

This is the market -analysis of the devotee-consumers' psychology of accepting the services of the Global God Company. People may or may not approve of it. But that is beside the point, for, the discourse here is not regarding the devotional attitude or the mind-set of those who do not mind standing in the queue for hours to have a glimpse of their saguna, sakar god (the idol of the god who otherwise remains invisible and intangible.) The point to be discussed here is 'the management system; organizing and managing of such an extensive business.

That this biggest and all inclusive field remains unplanned and unorganized is the real concern here. Shouldn't the changes, like modernity and transparency that have taken place in many

other domains be applied to this field too? What should be their direction? What should be the technique and philosophy of the changing management system? Will the standard of the facilities and services offered to the customers in this field improve or not? How will the temple management tune their age old traditions with the changing life style of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What kind of structure to handle emergency situations do the temple managements have raised to face the newly emerging problems of security of life and property? The most important point is that of the money the devotee-customers put in the kitty of the temple expecting it to be spent for some pious work by the temple authority. Is the money used for the purpose it is meant for? If not, is there any supervising system to monitor its use?

All these questions need to be very carefully looked into which we intend to do in the next article in the series. It requires much more attention as it happens to be concerning the biggest market in India, the present condition of that market and more importantly the future of this market.

Temple is a 'no profit' field and affects our economy and our mindset. We ought to understand and investigate it thoroughly. We should know what is happening in the global market of the temples. We all know that in the past our famous Somnath temple was raided and plundered by Mohammad of Gazani not once or twice but twenty-one times. He was not a religious fanatic; all he wanted was the wealth amassed there. Does our present system of temple management look like a modern state of art of the old Mohammad of Gazani method?

### **The high-tech temple management:**

Earlier we have seen that the temple market in India is the biggest market on all criteria-growth, social bond, coverage, size, whatever. Human beings need faith. Faith originated with man and will continue as long as he prevails on the earth. It is voyage without a beginning or an end. It is as personal as it is popular; as much deep rooted as it is shallow and uncouth. Compare these two scenes:

In the first scene the Paduka of some Maharaj are brought in a palanquin in a very poor village; the poor villagers give away all that their whole family earns in a day in worship of those Paduka; leaving their children too, to go to bed without food. This brings into light the fact that Indians are soaked in religion, body and soul; for ages religion has been hooked up with god, temple and the Maharajas -the so-called pious men; and therefore they find it more important to worship god and his agents than to ease the hunger in their stomachs. The utmost faith of the famished society is visible everywhere in rural India and may remain visible for a long time.

Now compare this scene with that of the ever increasing festivals being organized in every street and lane of the cities. These festivals are psychological acrobatics to assuage the real or imaginary fear and insecurity. The shrewd builders of huge complexes have well understood this



apprehension of their customers. So, very much like car parking they also plan a temple in their complex for parking your faith! And if a builder finds a dilapidated old temple quite close to his complex, then nothing like it. He grabs the opportunity of renovating the old temple and simultaneously gold-plating his own image. In addition forming a temple trust ensures sumptuous income for generations to come. This temple is bound to be overcrowded on days like Mahashivaratri, that guarantees double Punya (pious merit) to the devotees for all his religious actions of that day, almost like the shopping malls on 26<sup>th</sup> January (a holiday) when a grand sale is declared.

All of us are aware of what happened to those who confronted faith, head on, and branded religion and god a good dosage of opium. Similarly we have seen what those who proclaimed loudly that 'Human life means religion and god' have done to our country. That is why we should be careful not to succumb to either of these trends but raise pertinent questions regarding the system and its management without encouraging or ridiculing faith. It's a pity that these seats of wisdom where we expect to get answers to all problems of life are obliging us to question them. How can we allow the management of this system to remain mired in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and at the same time aspire to become a 'mighty developed Bharat' by 2020? The foot prints of development that are seen in other fields should be visible in this field too.

Can we just ignore it and shove off the responsibility of reform to the government? And can we afford to leave the biggest market ill managed and uncontrolled as it is in the present? Just imagine, there are minimum 4 crores devotees standing in front of the temples, expecting to be cleansed, purified and exempted from sins. This big a crowd will be there any time of the day. The job opportunity of this field increases by 5% at least every year. It is irrational to leave all this to the government. When the government is not capable of carrying out its own programmes inaugurated with such pomp and show, it is foolish to expect it to manage those programmes that it has not launched in the first place. Some want that the government should enact strict laws. Such laws are already there in place. But systems and their managements can never be reined in or improved by making laws.

From the 'the bottom to the top' is the new trend of reconstruction and revival of our nation; let us, therefore, begin with the prayer houses. In the past, temples were managed by the local princes, chieftains, kings, etc. Most of them being strong believers and quite generous towards them, the temples did not experience any economic problems. Times have changed now. Gone are the kings and the princes and the chieftains. They are replaced by governments. But the temples are as rich as they were before because the devotees are now more generous and more supportive. With their support, many Churches were built from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1947, (the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). They were accompanied by orphanages, schools, small indigenous banks, health centers, training centers, etc. Our temples too had many such social service

programmes for many centuries. However the programmes mainly aimed at spiritual enhancement, peace of mind, realization of god, etc. but no social reform per se. Unlike the Christian Missionaries, propagation of religion had never been on their agenda. Only later 'Brahmo Samaj', a kind of reformist religion grew out of Hindu religion and similarly the Nirankari and Namadhari sects were expounded out of Sikhism. These sects initiated social reforms through their temple organizations.

However, 1860 onwards till as recently as 2000, various independent laws or sections, case laws have been made, time and again, to monitor and regulate registrations of the trusts, their administration, their income and expenditure. While these laws are already in place, in reality, a few wise men from the town or village come together and manage the business of the temples there; then with skillful lobbying they also become 'high profile' members of the committee for temple administration. On one hand we have this temple management by a few local inhabitants and on the other are quite attractive, interactive, state of the art Websites offering web-pooja too. This makes it possible for you to witness not only your deity but also the deity's elaborate live pooja on your webcam from wherever you happen to be in the world. With the passage of time the temple architecture has changed. The advances in Information Technology too affect the temple system.

Today we have fantastic 'off the shelf' as well as customized software for temple-management available in the market. The software simplifies management, supplies information to the devotees, helps making the timetable of poojas, keeps account of income and expenditure, keeps record of donations, makes reports in whatever form one needs; you name it and the software will put it together. There is software to take care of every aspect of management of temples including those specially designed for employees of the temples. But hardly anyone uses any software. Most of the administrators and the trustees are above 60 and 70 years. They do not care for these modern fads since they have seen the temples being run without them since time immemorial. They may be right but one cannot ignore the fact that temple management, with a very few exceptions, is lagging far behind other fields where management and technological modification and improvement is readily accepted.

The cause of this state of affairs lies in the way the managing committees are appointed. Most of us believe that the 'no profit, no loss' line of work does not require any modern techniques of management or technology. They are needed only in the profitable lines of work. This outlook is totally wrong. Consider the dealings that take place in the temple-trade: transactions run into 40 to 50 crores of rupees, 500 to 550 employees, 10 to 15 thousand devotee clientele, a few patrons, needy solicitants, etc. The picture of transactions is the same in thousands of traditionally managed temples. Most of the employees in these temples are either over-worked or listless. For, they know that their clientele is not going to reduce whether they keep the temple premises clean or not; whether they are transparently and properly managed or not and whether the necessary improvements are made or not. They do not feel any urgency to make the management of the

temples devotee-friendly. Moreover despite the 'Public Trust Act', the appointment of members on the board of trustees is hereditary. Except from a few families no other person is likely to be elected as a member of the board, as it involves caste, cultural and more than anything else, monetary interests and convenience is the most important criterion in selection. Once the principle of blood-relation is accepted it becomes an unchangeable tradition passed down through generations. Any change towards modernization is resisted as a danger to the religious solemnity and gravity of the place. Eventually this tendency develops into chauvinism and a sort of weapon in the hands of the management to avoid any improvement.

Once this tendency is engendered there is no need to be aware of why the devotees visit that particular place of worship and what kind of services he ought to be offered. This is why we come across headlines in the news paper: 200 killed and 400 injured in the jam caused in the Haj Yatra. The name of the place and the number of injured and killed change but the story is the same wherever you go, in the temples on particularly auspicious days or in the fairs of various deities or 'Kumbha Mela' or some 'Palakhi'. It can happen even in the Shopping Malls and Multiplexes. At such places we ought to appoint people who are trained and experienced in the management of crowds. If we leave the management of such large crowds in the hands of the ignorant inheritors of the temple management, such accidents will be on the increase because neither the crowd nor the mismanagement is going to shrink.

My intention here is not to brand all temple-management as corrupt and incompetent. But a few questions in this connection need to be answered. How can we define the enterprise of temple management? Do we need to classify our devotee-clientele? Are our temple personnel suitably trained for offering services to their clientele? How to assess the changing attitude of the devotees and change our services accordingly? How can we apply the Marketing techniques to temple management? Are there any universal norms? These are very sensitive issues and need to be handled very carefully but in another article.

Today's management of the temples is astute enough to astound even those politicians for whom aggrandizement of wealth is as important as worshiping god; 'Money may not be god but its importance is no less than that of god' is their guiding principle. In the olden days some anonymous devotees who wanted to do something beneficial to the society, built these temples. Today many nameless individuals have occupied these very temples with the intention of earning name and fame.

I have in front of me, here, an advertisement -not of a bike or a soft drink or a computer manufacturing company- but that of a Church, at Illinois in America. The title of the add is very attractive. It tells a lot about what goes on in that church. See the main body of the advertisement; it says, 'Church is that building with stone walls and stained glasses, right at the street corner, where on Sunday Mornings a lot of people gather. For years you have not been able to visit this place, as

you were busy studying, growing, marrying and raising a family. We too were as busy as you were and you will be astonished to know the programmes we organized all this time.' Next come the lists of all programmes for children, for young men and women and for older men and women. It also tells how one can participate in the social activities organized by the church. But the most important thing is the account of collection of money in the church and how it is spent on various programmes, in what proportion and in what way.

In our country where people are basically very religious, there is no need to persuade them to visit the temple. It is, on the contrary, necessary to tell them not to overcrowd the temples. There is such a devotional deluge in our country that we may be compelled to advertise advising people to avoid visiting the temple on auspicious days to evade stampede and getting hurt. All the same, it is important that transparency of account of all the money that is collected in the temples and how and on what programmes is it spent should be maintained. The temples should accept the responsibility of maintaining transparency of accounts and put the accounts before the public. It is also necessary that the devotees should insist on that the temple management does this sincerely and systematically. The devotees ought to be alert about what happens to the money that they put into the collection box or in the salver at the time of prayers and whose coffers does it reach finally; they should keep the management on their toes.

A three to four year old report regarding the accounting is relevant here as an example. That it is four years old is not important; what is pertinent is the research method, the recoding of minute changes and its transparency. Although the report is about American Churches, their attitude towards the devotees is an exemplar. These are some of its findings: 70 % Americans regularly donate about one thousand dollars per household to the churches. 55 % Americans offer their services as volunteers to the church once in a year. The total work-hours they put in amount to 20 billion and are worth 230 billion dollars. This means that the notion that the rulers of the developing countries compel their unruly people to believe in god is baseless. For the Faith Market is universal and prevails as much in the developed countries of the West as it does in the developing ones. The trouble-free, prosperous and uninhibited life of the people of the developed countries needs faith as much as or even more than people of the developing countries. In short, human mind, where ever you go, gets pleasure and gratification from faith. That is why nearly 5.5 million staff works fulltime or part time in the 0.4 million churches, in addition to the innumerable unpaid volunteers. 60 % of the total donation that the Americans make, goes to the Church. The remaining 40 % goes to education, arts, sports, human rights, conservation of nature, health, etc. Many research projects are undertaken to enhance the amount of donation. The church goers are classified according to their age. How many hours every class spends in the church every week; what individual difficulties do they face; their difficulties as a class; and such other things are thoroughly investigated. The

physical difficulties of devotees over 60 years of age are specially taken care of, providing all the facilities they need.

Some of us may find all this very similar to the surveys made by profit making soap or bike industries. But we must remember that when a customer in the crowd, wherever or whatever he wants to buy- even if it is a glimpse of his deity- there should be some established order or a system to cater to his need. Nobody will doubt that this system should not be arrogant, but be, on the contrary, responsive to the devotee-customer. Why shouldn't it be almost like any profit making system competing with others to retain their customer. Notice here that in both (the church and the profit making company) there is a service providing agency and a customer accepting that service. This similarity and the guiding principle of customer satisfaction should apply to the temples too.

Now we have to determine what is meant by a responsive administration. It is that administration that understands the customers, tries to fulfill their needs, listens to their complaints, welcomes change and provides the details of all these transactions along with its accounts. The customer quickly notices the difference in the service offered by such establishments; viz. the temples in this case are clean and the edifice is well looked after, there are special arrangements for women and elderly people; the staff is willing, considerate and courteous and one feels calm and relaxed at such a place.

Most of us visit our family deities once every year. How much of it is due to tradition and how much because we experience a kind of tranquility? We pay for 'Abhishek' (drop by drop ablution of an idol) on our children's birthdays and obtain a receipt for it; but are we at the same time satisfied with the service? The filth in the premises, the arrogance of the staff and the 'couldn't care less' attitude of the administration exasperate us. At times, out of frustration we go to the temple office give vent to our annoyance and submit a written complaint. But it is the total indifference that saddens us. The management here is insensitive and unresponsive.

Of course, I won't wholly blame the management for it. With the change in time, the various components that go to make the management need to be trained so as to adjust mentally to changing demands. But no such attempt has been made in this field of religious service. Every establishment in the non-profit field, -this certainly includes temple keeping- ought to ask itself certain questions. 'What is our business? Yes, keeping a temple is a business but based on no-profit principle. Who is our customer? What are his needs? What is their purpose in coming here? What kind of experience should we offer them? Etc.

Keeping all pride and prejudice aside, when we dispassionately try to answer these questions, we notice that temple keeping is a 'feel good' business and as such faith is our business here. Once this plain truth is accepted, then the customer - the devotee to whom we offer our services - stands before us in a clear perspective. We now become aware of his needs, his

predicaments and also can imagine what principles and techniques of management can be of help here. But for this to happen what we need is a professional outlook.

Can we not organize an all inclusive management that can take care of those devotees who regularly visit the temple with utter devotion as well as those who can and do donate generously? Compare this to a company. A company has share holders who not only share the profit that the company makes but also possess the right to intervene in the running of the company and also suggest changes. They keep an eye on the balance sheet, various transactions and policies of the company through the annual meetings of share holders. Then why should the share holders of a temple keeping company- the devotees who come there for gaining religious merit, the workers employed there, the volunteers who maintain sanctity of the temple, the priest who maintains the tradition, the vendors and peddlers who sell flowers, garlands, lockets, booklets, stickers, cassettes, etc. - not participate in an annual meeting as do those of any other company? Why should they not have the same privileges that are enjoyed by the share holders in the profit making fields?

Why shouldn't the complaints of the devotees and their redressal by the temple authorities be displayed in the temple premises where it can be easily noticed by all? If done, it will create a confidence in the minds of the devotees that the temple authorities are sensitive and responsive towards the convenience of the devotees. Financial transparency will further enhance this confidence. Agreed that it is not all that easy; but it will certainly help develop certain models and principles for management of temples.

Let me give an example. What is the normal source of earning of a temple? It is mostly the money put in the coffers by the devotees and the sale of 'Prasad', photos, etc., and also from renting out the enormous spaces owned by the temples. We can collect the data such as how many devotees visit the temple every day and how much is their contribution; how many visit once a month, once in six months and once a year; how much is their total donation; the amount of annual rent collected; the average increase expected in it; etc. If all this can be properly analysed, the temple may raise enough funds for a big project.

A couple of new points can be raised here. Man wanted to divulge the mystery of creation of the universe; philosophy came into being to serve this purpose. Different philosophies had their own adherents and to retain the faith of these adherents in that particular philosophy, rituals were invented. And finally the adherents needed to develop chauvinism to keep the faith 'burning brightly'. But at the same time, since time immemorial, the different faiths along with their progress also encouraged variety of arts-sculpture, music, painting, dramas, plays, etc. This development continued very nobly and sanctimoniously through centuries, resulting in the famous sculptures of 'kailas Lene' and that in the 'Pulakeshi' caves. Similarly beautiful Churches and Cathedrals were constructed in the West. Today such nourishment of arts in prayer houses seems to have come to an end. In fact every temple, here, should organize at least one music programme and one arts

exhibition for the delight of their devotee followers. We should insist that the temple management arranges such programmes and makes provision for them in their budget.

One more fact about raising a temple. It is fashionable for some spiritualists to abandon all earthly affections and raise a hermitage where many male and female ascetic disciples are expected to gather. The head of the hermitage then has a huge family of disciples much too larger than the one he abandons. And here lies the rub. One must be chary about the purpose behind raising a hermitage, a temple or a prayer house. It can be a means to get hold of a piece of land which otherwise is very difficult. More than the deity that is supposed to be alive and quick to respond to the devotees' difficulties, the devotees themselves ought to be alert and quick to respond to the land grabbing gang behind the Guru of the hermitage or the temple.

We ought to look at all these schemes and designs objectively and impartially. These days we have temples as well as bars at every street corner and you will not find a single bar that does not prominently display the photo of some Baba, Buva or Guru. Similarly in the long queue before a deity there is not a single person who comes there just to feel cleansed and purified. Each one of them comes to ask for some favour from the deity. The sincere devotees in the 'Pandharpur Vari' feel overwhelmed by the mere sight of the temple dome and shed tears of joy that they have reached their destination. But the same Vari also consists of many so called devotees and their supporters needed to look after their leaders' carnal desires. We stoop before the devotees who are overjoyed at the sight of the dome while the other kind disturbs and saddens us. Similarly the faith of the devotees walking long distances barefoot goes hand in hand with the filth in the sands of the river Chandrabhaga.

Simply purifying one's own mind is a narrow, self centered attitude. What we need is to raise the necessary infrastructure that goes to help us peep into our own minds; we need to provide the management and administration that is well informed and answerable. I had been to Chennai a few years back. After a hectic week I decided to rest in the hotel on the Sunday. I had to go, however, for delivering a lecture at Kanchipuram. While on the way, my host informed me, 'it's a small town of weavers and temples.' Lecturing on information technology would be a great blunder here, I thought. As we entered the town we noticed a beautiful temple. Noticing the pleasure on my face the host suggested that we visit the temple. I pointed out the huge crowd waiting in the queue, but in a few minutes I found myself in front of the pleasant idol with a prayer salver in my hand, in the calm and serene atmosphere of the temple. As I came out of the sanctum sanctorum, I was surrounded by a number of youngsters in saffron clothes with sacred ashes smeared on their bodies. And to my utter surprise, they actually started asking me questions on 'Microsoft Windows 98'. Later they all attended my lecture and bombarded me with questions on technology to IT till I sat in the car to return to Chennai. Finally I could not help myself and asked them, 'why do you need to know about IT when you all are going to spend rest of your life in the temple and looking after it?' One

youngster replied, 'we have abandoned all this-worldly pleasures but not the pursuit of knowledge. Computer and Internet are the means of acquiring knowledge. Should we not use these modern means to improve our administration?' I saluted them. I am confident that our temples will, one day, become pursuers of knowledge. What about you?

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(Translated from Marathi by Ms Suman Oak)

## Prologue: Disenchanted India

*Johannes Quack*

Friends, I am an activist of the organization Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti.' The van you see outside belongs to ANiS. There is a big board in the front of the van which reads *vijnanbodh vahini* (science-awareness vehicle). Can you guess what that means? It means that we help people understand science. But we are not here to teach you science. This is a science program but it is not going to teach you science and it is not a science quiz. This is a different sort of program. Friends, you must have seen the various things that we keep here. You can see a lamp, a coconut, a nail board, a candle, and many other things. We do not use such things in our science studies. Rather, we collected these things from our *devghar* (prayer room) and from the bag of a *bhagat*, *tantrik*, or *mantrik* (religious specialist or healer). They use these things to cheat you, but we will use them to educate you.

Friends, we are going to watch a program about *chamatkar* (miracles). We are going to learn about *bhūt* (ghost) and *bhanamati* (sort of black magic), and how one becomes possessed by a ghost; we will also learn about quackery and *karani* (witchcraft or sorcery). We will learn about what all these are, how and why these things happen, and about the people who engage in such acts. Friends, Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti has worked for the past twenty years. We show the same program to audiences everywhere we go. Our organization works towards the eradication of such superstition. Why does the organization work on these issues? Because it is our duty! Our constitution tells us to encompass a scientific approach, to value humanity and an inventive mindset, and help others to do the same. It is our duty as Indian citizens. This is why the organization works on these issues.



These are the opening words of a program conducted by activists from the rationalist organization Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (Organization for the Eradication of Superstition - ANiS). During my ethnographic fieldwork on the aims and activities of this organization, I accompanied groups of activists who traveled for several months with their “science vans” throughout Maharashtra giving lectures and performing programs in villages, schools, and colleges. Their declared aim is “to promote scientific temper and to eradicate superstitions’

The procedure used is generally the same each time they give such a program. The activists spread out the tools needed for their program on a large table, as the village square or lecture hall gradually fills with interested students, teachers, or members of the public. After the introductory words, the head of the science-van team usually continues by informing the audience of the legacy of which they, as rationalists, see themselves a part. They are aware of the criticism sometimes directed at them for being an extreme and anti-religious organization and also that some accuse them of being westernized, of eroding Indian identity religion and tradition by spreading “Western thinking”. Although the rationalists do not evade confrontations with such critics, they anticipate certain common reactions, and work to counter these with statements such as:

We at ANiS carry forward the work of the government and earlier reformers. This work is not ours alone; all of us are part of it. Even though it is us who go around wearing the badge of ANiS and do this work, we believe it is the teachers who are the real activists. From our textbooks we learnt about the words of saints and the thoughts of reformers. They have attacked traditions and rituals. Have you heard of Tukaram, Gadge Baba, Dnyaneshwar, and Eknath, or of other saints? Have you read their abhanga (hymns)? Or have you read the texts of reformists like Charvaka, Dr. Ambedkar, Rajaram Mohan Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar including those of Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule or Agarkar? If you read their literature, you will see that they held the same thought as we do today.

All the saints devoted their lives to spreading awareness. Some 350 years ago; Saint Tukaram realized that nobody can conceive by a *navas* (taking a religious vow) but this belief remains in people to this day. In his *Bhajans* (devotional songs) Saint Gadge Baba sing us '*asa kasa tumcha dev, jo gheyi bakaryacha jiv?*' (How can you have this kind of a god, who believes in taking the life of a goat?), but the meaning of his words were lost on people. Even today, people sacrifice cocks or

goats to a “god” who is just a stone colored with *sindhur* (vermillion). Many such superstitious acts continue to take place in our society. Some of these are connected to possession by ghosts and *d jadu tona* (black magic). In other instances people give their money to quacks and receive mistreatment and exploitation at their hands.

Slowly but surely the speaker from the science-van team becomes more enthusiastic, revealing his dedication and commitment to the rationalists’ cause. His self-confident and challenging demeanor is evidence of his conviction that he knows what is wrong with Indian society and what needs to be done to solve the problems in question. In this manner, the ANiS activist elaborates on the importance of their work. According to him it is of utmost importance not only because science disproves many religious claims but also because irrationalities and superstitions are often at the heart of injustice, exploitation, cheating, malpractice, quackery, and other harmful activities. (On the question of whether “science” should in this case be written with a capital ‘S’, see chapter 12.) To illustrate the danger of superstitious beliefs, the activist lists several examples of harmful practices associated with them:

Last year in Mumbai, the salty seawater suddenly turned sweet during the rainy season. People said it was the work of some Muslim Baba and because of the darga (the tomb of a Muslim saint) nearby. People believed it was holy water. They drank the water; they anointed their foreheads with it and took it home in bottles. Actually, rainwater which drains into the sea made the seawater sweet. People drank the dirty water that actually came from the Mithi river (a river in Salsette Island, on which the city of Mumbai is located), considering it a blessing. People even paid for bottled water from the Mithi. These sorts of incidents continue to take place in our society. People believe all kinds of things....

In the village we stayed in last night, a young boy died because his father refused to take him to the dispensary. The local *bhondhu* (trickster, quack) had told him that he could cure the boy through *jhādni* (dry twigs or broom; when *jhadni* is used on a person, it is believed to sweep away the evil spirit from a person’s body). These superstitions are strongest in, but by no means limited to, our villages....

When we go to the market to buy a TV, we bring it home and put it on the table. But we do not turn it on until we have performed the necessary rituals. We place flowers in front of the TV, burn incense-sticks, and break a coconut before we

turn it on. On moonless days, villagers clean their vehicles and tie lime, chilies, and a black doll (hung upside down) to their cars in order to ward away bad omens. They believe that doing so will protect their vehicles from accidents. If this was true then we could have done this to every vehicle. Even today, people tie up black dolls at the entrance of a new house which has just started being built to keep evil spirits away. This is blind faith. I am here today to talk about this issue.

People still believe in black magic. It is unfortunate that certain incidents still take place in our society. Two months ago a teacher from Bhandara district sacrificed his daughter. Some Babā had suggested that he should sacrifice his daughter in order to secure a better future. The teacher then killed his daughter. Many such incidents take place in Maharashtra. People are killed or are buried alive owing to superstition and their belief in witchcraft and black magic. Women are burned because people accuse them of being witches. Our traditional system is patriarchal and Hinduism, as in the case of all other religions, sees women as inferior to men....

Friends, we can find many such *bābās*, *buvas*, *bhagats*, *mullās*, *phakirs*, *mantriks*, and *tantriks*. They perform so-called miracles and strengthen the hold of superstition over people. There is a Babā in our country who moves his hand in the air and then “conjures” up a gold chain to present to an *āmadār* (member of State Assembly). The next time he conjures a gold ring to give to some VIP. If you or I were to go to him, he would present us with *vibhuti* (holy ash). The present he gives depends upon the status of the visitor so the Bābās end up doing politics. There are many such Bābās in India and they have demarcated their own territories: one in Gujarat, another in Karnataka and a third in Tamil Nadu. We are very small in comparison to the influence they have but our movement is growing. Maharashtra has two or three big Babas and countless small ones. One of the more well-known Babas proclaimed that the world would be submerged in 1999 and that only devotees wearing his locket or in possession of one of his pens would survive. Every one else would die, he said. Friends, there are many such people spread superstitions in our society and we get unknowingly taken advantage of.

After nearly an hour of lecturing, the performance part of the program begins. It consists of the performing of alleged miracles as they are used by “godmen”. Godmen is a generic term the rationalists use to refer to people who claim to have *aloukik shakti* (supernatural powers). For the rationalists such “godmen” are malevolent tricksters,

conjurers, charlatans, quacks, thugs, and liars; rationalists object to and try to debunk them, especially those who claim to heal, foretell the future, or perform miracles in order to make an income. It is a shared decisive aim among Indian rationalists that such people should be imprisoned as they are considered to be exploiting peoples' gullibility. The group that ANIS targets in this criticism is heterogeneous and includes all kinds of local healers, representatives and specialists of various religious traditions, wandering *sādhus*, astrologists, and so on. The Hindi and Marathi terms used to refer to them include *Babā*, *bhagat*, *buva*, *mullā*, *sādhū*, *maulavi*, *phakir*, *tantrik*, or *mantrik*. In this book, I will use these Hindi and Marathi terms in reference to specific "professions," but will use "godman" in general since it is the term most often used by ANIS (even in Marathi) and can be understood in a neutral, positive, or negative sense.

After the performance, the rationalists explain the science behind the alleged miracles in order to show the audience that all supernatural claims can be explained naturally. The "miracles" the activists of ANIS stage in front of the astonished and enraptured (not to say, "enchanted") audience include tricks such as materializing rings and necklaces from thin air, banishing a ghost from a pot of rice, producing water from an empty pot, sticking a *trishūl* (a "trident" that has religious connotations) through one's tongue, and walking over glowing coals. Moreover, for each miracle they tell us a corresponding story about how some "godman" is made rich in the process, how many people died as a result of mistreatment, or how ANIS managed to put the "godman" behind bars for harming or exploiting people. In one instance, for example, the activist starts to mumble a made-up mantra and trickles some "holy oil" onto a (chemically prepared) coconut which bursts into flames within seconds. To the astonished and amazed audience members he announces:

This is a miracle! The same miracle was demonstrated in the form of a larger yajna (fire sacrifice) when Indira Gandhi was present, but she did not believe in the miracle. She didn't get trapped. She started thinking and then thought all night about how this might have happened. She was educated; that is why she started thinking. She could not quite get her head around it. Then, the next morning, she called up a scientist who gave her the scientific explanation behind the miracle. She realized that if the Prime Minister could be so easily duped, how much easier it would be for these *bābas* and *buvas* to cheat and exploit the common people. She therefore recommended stressing the value of scientific temper in education. In

addition, she declared the spread of a scientific temper to be the duty of all Indians. Scientific temper means to not just believe blindly but to question and confirm.

The same experiment was demonstrated in Gangakhed (Parbhani district) but people never bothered to pay close attention to what was really on display. The yajna went on for seven days and was meant to bring rain. The Baba in charge did the same experiment for rain and the people were duped. People started believing him and bowed down in his presence. While paying visits, as usual, people started putting money in the collection box. They gave away their money without even counting how much they were giving away. Over seven days, the total amount collected was 13 lakh and 70 thousand rupees (1,370,000 Rupees). This news was printed in the local paper. We kept the news cuttings. The total cost for this experiment is 50 paise. With a 50 paise capital, those people earn 13 lakh rupees. That is how much business they do. How do they get away with it? It is because people like us trust them so easily.

When we see a person with long beard, wearing garlands and saffron-colored robes or religious clothes, we feel he must be some great person. So we should visit him and bow down to him. You should not do this! There is usually a *badmas* (thug) hidden behind the long beard. So we should make sure first. If I had on a saffron-colored robe with a *mālā* (garland with religious connotations) around my neck and *vibhuti* (holy ash) on my forehead and had demonstrated this experiment in your village, there would have been a long line of villagers waiting to visit me. They would have bowed down at my feet and given me money; they would have given me acclaim (by saying) *chamatkari baba ki jai* (praise the miracle-man). They would have believed that I had the power to cure all their illnesses and would have stopped taking real medicine or visiting the doctor. The people who demonstrate miracles are cheats and they cheat us. We should not let them trap us; we should not believe them. We should ask ourselves how and why this happens. There are no miracles. Miracles can never happen.

This is one of the key messages of the rationalists: "Miracles can never happen". There is nothing *aloukik* (supernatural, remarkable, or singular) in the world; in principle everything can be explained through science, they say. The rationalists do not only try to inform their fellow Indians of the different ways they are cheated and exploited in the name

of the religion and the supernatural, they also want them to take on new worldview. Their aim is to make them realize that most Indians live in a backward condition and that *pragati* (progress) and *vikas* (development) necessarily require a rationalistic attitude concerning all spheres of life. Central to the particular stance toward the world that rationalists try to propagate is their 'ideology of doubt,' which includes the urge to question and confront religious and traditional authorities and to adopt what they call a "scientific temper".

All regions in the world have superstitions, even a country like America. Superstitions exist everywhere, but in different forms. Our forms are very *magas* (backward). We are lagging a century behind Europe. Their blind faith allows them to buy plots on the moon while ours worship the moon. Science has progressed so much that Sunita Williams, a woman with Indian origin rotated the earth in space for six months. At the same time our society is so backward that our highly educated women including doctors and engineers rotate (circumambulate) a *vat* (Banyan tree-ritual performed to secure the lives of their husbands and keep the same groom for several births to come). Nobody knows whether this really works or not as nobody ever tried to verify it. We just never raise doubts or think about the issue. Our society continues to follow these traditions. The child does what his father does and his child follows him in turn. Nobody reflects on why we do what we do. From childhood onwards, as in nursery school, our teacher teaches us to be quiet. (*hatachi ghadi tondavar bot* – hands folded and finger on the lips), in other words, stop talking and do not ask any questions. If someone asks questions, they get a spanking. 'Keep quiet, no questions, let things happen the way they used to and always have. Science insists on asking questions and encourages us to never believe anything blindly. Science asks you to check and *andhasraddha* (superstition or blind faith) asks you to believe without doing the necessary check. We have to adopt a scientific temper because we and our parents get cheated. Our parents take us to such people. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents never went to school. That is why; they do not have the scientific perspective. But we are science students; we should be more progressive these days. Long ago, human beings lived in the jungle. They had no clothes, and no shelter. Even though humanity has progressed gradually, it seems that we cannot develop further. Superstition has hampered our growth. That is why we should learn; this program will help to understand these issues. When watching every such experiment, do examine,

observe, rationalize, and draw conclusions. Try this by yourself. You should keep this in mind.

Some four hours later all the lectures have been given and several rationalist songs have been sung at intervals to entertain the audience. After many miracles have been performed and the science behind the alleged miracles has been explained, the rationalists make a final announcement. They ask the people whether the local healers and “godmen” are willing to make some money. At the approval of the audience, they announce that ANIS will award 21 lakh rupees (2,100,000) to anybody who is able to prove their supernatural powers under scientific conditions. This underlines again the message they wish to spread: their conviction that all supernatural claims can be explained naturally using science. They admit that they were not able to tackle and debunk all existing supernatural claims but are convinced that, in principle, this would be possible.

There are so many such miracles, which we should crosscheck and discuss. But we do not have that much time. So just remember that there are no miracles. People who believe in miracles are stupid, people who perform tricks are thugs and people who do not make an effort to crosscheck are cowards.

Courtesy: Extract from his book,

***Disenchanting India,***

*Organised Rationalism and*

*Criticism of Religion in India*

Published by OUP)

### **Cry ‘Karam Ali Darvesh’**

*Dr. Narendra Dabholkar*

On the Pune-Satara road you come across a village, Khed Shivapur, about 30 miles away from Pune. Near the road, at the turn into the village, is situated the shrine of Karam Ali Baba. This shrine is visited by people of all religions. It is called ‘Karam Ali Darvesh Darga’. Off and on it happens to be in the lime light through the documentary produced by Film Division or on some TV channel.

There are two stones in front of the shrine, one is said to weigh 90 kilos and the other 60 kilos. For lifting the heavier stone the support of only one finger each of 11 people is needed while the lighter one needed only 9 people. The team needs just touch the stone with their

fingers and cry, 'Karam Ali Darvesh ki Jai'. And to the surprise of all, the stone becomes as light as a feather and can be raised up to the head, only by the touch of 11 fingers, in case of the bigger and 9 in case of the smaller one. The number of people should just be 11 and 9, no more or no less. The cry ought to be 'Karam Ali Darvesh' and not any other call. There should not be even a single woman in the team.

The old myth behind this goes: Karam Ali Darvesh was a Fakir (Muslim mendicant) who had witnessed manifestation of god. No one knows how and when did he reach this place. But he expelled all goblins, spirits, fiends and devils from the village and at the age of 70 years ended his life in a Samadhi (buried himself alive). The Fakir cursed two demons, who lived in this place, that they will turn into stones and people will lift them and hurl them down on the ground.

The curse of the Fakir and the erstwhile demons now turned into boulders is a topic of great interest and curiosity. The Mumbai Door Darshan telecast the miracle in June 1987 without offering any scientific explanation. We then had to step in and demystify and relieve the boulders of the curse. We received plenty of letters; some of them taunting us, 'here is a real miracle; how can you explain it?' while others sincerely wanted to know whether a miracle like this is possible.

Babar reached Khed Shivapur. We had to make our way through beggars, flower vendors and pilgrims and climb 10-12 steps of stones leading to the gate of the shrine. The two big boulders are placed on both the sides of the main entrance to the shrine. One is a sand stone and the other black granite. Both are chiseled into shape like a pressure cooker with diameter and height of one foot each. They are beyond the main platform of the shrine. On the entrance there is a board announcing that women are prohibited from entering in.

A short, stunted youth with a red kerchief tied round his head stood beside the stone. I asked him, how to lift the stone, He explained, '11 persons should put their forefingers to the stone and shout in unison 'Karam Ali Darvessssh'; the stone becomes light as paper and is lifted easily.' A few men with kerchiefs tied round their heads, sitting on the railing came forward and asked, 'Do you want to see?' As we nodded our consent, they called others. We were seven of us and four of the fence sitters put forefingers of our right hands to the stone. They counted the fingers and made sure that they were exactly eleven. Then we shouted in unison 'Karam Ali Darvesh'. The stone moved just half a foot up and then over turned on one side. We tried once again but the stone would not go up more than half a foot. The devotees were quite confused; then it suddenly dawned on them that the visitors have not



removed their foot wares! We were ordered to remove our shoes and chappals. We did so and once again applying our forefingers cried, 'Karam Ali!' The result was no better. The men with the head scarves now became restless and withdrew. They were perplexed. How can the power of their sage fail them? In fact, there was no cause for confusion, for we had decided to just touch the stone with our fingers and not apply any force. Poor Karam Ali could not help!

Then we collected four visitors like us and told them to apply their forefingers and shouted as earlier. To the surprise of all the devotees, the stone was lifted high up to the shoulder which we then threw in the sand below. The pallid faces of the men with head scarves now brightened. More and more crowd gathered round us. Then we declared that we will lift the stone without shouting Karam Ali. Someone from the crowd warned us, not to be too wise since 'even the wrestlers from Kolhapur just a couple of days before had tried and failed. It is not very easy as you think.'

Mandape, one of our activists, said, 'let us see, nothing like trying to do it.' We all put our fingers again under the stone and shouted 'Mahatma Phule Ki Jai!' We lifted the stone much above the shoulders and hurled it down. The crowd now became restless. Next we invented another tactic; why only 11 people, why won't 10 or 12 do? We tried it very successfully not only on the stone in question but also on the other untried stone using 8 or 10 persons instead of 9.

The atmosphere was now quite conducive to exposing superstitions like the one in the question. Two women onlookers too desired to put their fingers to the stone and asked us if they too can try their hand at it. Actually women were expected not even to touch the stone. The devotees blindly support such irrational rules of religious places. They are scared of disobeying those rules so blatantly, for, that may be inviting unnecessary calamities. But at this stage we were not prepared to withdraw. We invited the women to try lifting the stone.

With those two women and four other onlookers, we - four of us - put our fingers under the stone and said, 'come on, shout one, two, three—.' The stone was lifted very easily and quite high. The women looked thrilled. It was, by now, quite clear that there was no mystery behind lifting of the stone. Once the causality of the miracle is understood, the mystery disappears. We put on our shoes and were about to leave when it struck us that we have not tried lifting the stone with our shoes on. So we lifted both the stones with our shoes on and hurled them down.

Here is the explanation of the so called miracle. The fingers under the stone apply force on it. The force works equally on all sides so that it does not tilt and is held firmly. Shouting in unison helps apply the force simultaneously. Haven't we all heard the laborers singing in unison while moving large blocks of wood or raising the water tanks to the top of the building? The stone gets lifted because force is applied from all sides. Moving up from the ground level requires the fingers to apply more force. But once it moves up from the ground all the load is borne by the muscles of the wrist and the elbow behind it. Thus lifting the stone high up becomes easy.

We do not know what happened to the daemons that were turned into the stones by the Fakir. But while hurling the stones which symbolized superstition a thought came into our minds, 'when shall we be able to overthrow the yoke of the daemons of superstition from the necks of our people?'

Translated by Ms Suman Oak

### **Srimad Bhagwat Gita: Not a Religious book?**

*Ram Puniyani*

Srimad Bhagwat Gita or Bhagwat Gita or Gita has been in the news recently for various reasons. Few months ago, the matter came up when a Siberian Court in the Tomsk City of Russia was to decide about the ban on the translation of Gita by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad Swami, the founder of ISKCON. The argument was that this particular translation was promoting social discord and so be banned. It was perceived in India as if there is a demand for ban on Gita in Russia. In this context the matter came up in the parliament and a strong protest was voiced against banning of Hindu religious text. Later the court did not ban this particular translation and so the matters came to rest there. Incidentally it can be reemphasized that Gita as a Hindu religious scripture is prevalent in Russia from centuries, and what was being demanded was a ban on particular translation and not on the Holy Scripture as such.

Closer home, the M. P. High court has ruled (Jan 2012) that "Gita is essentially a book on Indian philosophy, not book on Indian religion". This judgment gave a sanction on the decision of M.P. Government to continue with the teaching of Gita Sar (Essence of Gita) in the MP schools. This petition had come up in the court when the Catholic Bishop Council

appealed that moral values of all religions should be taught in schools and not just Gita. So now the MP High Court has concluded that since Gita is a book on Indian Philosophy and not on religion, it can be continued as such and the need to consider introducing the moral values from other religions as well, need not be considered. Incidentally other BJP ruled state; Karnataka is also planning to introduce the teaching of Gita in its schools. While giving this judgment, one wonders if the honorable judge forgot that while the oath is administered to Hindus in his court, they are made to do take oath by keeping their hand on the same Holy book, as a religious book not for its philosophy!

One is reminded of another judgment at this time, the one known as “Hindutva as a way of life”. The Supreme Court was to decide whether the use of the word Hindutva in elections tantamount to corrupt electoral practices or not, as Hindutva divides people along religious lines. Contrary to the theological, sociological and political understanding that Hinduism is a religion and that the word Hindutva is built around Hindu religious identity, Court ruled something which opened the floodgates of dividing people along religious lines. This judgment ‘Hindutva is a way of life’ exonerated someone who was doing divisive religious propaganda and gave legitimacy to the politics in the name of religion. Now the Gita judgment has again raised the questions about the nature of Hinduism, its religious texts and its religious belief.

Opportunistically the MP government and other Hindutva ideologues who called Gita as a holy Hindu religious scripture, and so needs to be taught in schools are keeping quiet, as this judgment suits their political agenda. The confusions prevail at multiple layers, as Hinduism is not a prophet based religion and there is no single 'revealed holy book' this understanding is being used by many to take the convenient path of taking the meaning which suits their purpose.

While term Hindu is of late origin, eighth century, the consolidation of Hinduism from the various prevailing religious sects has been a process beginning around that time with Magadh Mauryan empire. There are many a religious scriptures, many a holy books in this umbrella of Hinduism, Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. So which is the holy scripture of Hindus? While all these books are regarded as Holy, over a period of time Hindu religion is being shaped around, One Deity, (Lord Ram) One Book (Gita), One Clergy (Acharyas, Mahants). The verdict of the court defies logic when it proclaims, “Gita is essentially a book on Indian philosophy not book on Indian religion.”

The Bhagwat Gita or Gita (Song of God) is a 700 verse scripture that is part of the epic Mahabharata. As it is drawn from Mahabharata it can be labeled as Smriti text. Some sects of Hinduism give it the status of Upanishad, thereby making it sruti (revealed) book. It is also regarded to represent the summary of Upanishadic teachings and so it is also called as 'Upanishad of Upanishads'. In this Holy Scripture Lord Krishna teaches Arjun about his duties as a Prince belonging to Kshtriya Varna. Arjun was faced with the dilemma of the war, the possibility of killing his own kin, cousins and others. Lord tells Arjun that it is his holy duty to undertake the war. Lord elaborates on different Yogas and so Gita is often described as a core of Hindu theology. As most holy scriptures are the revelations from the supreme God, in Gita also Krishna reveals his identity as Supreme Being himself (Svayam Bhagvan). He blesses Arjun with the awe inspiring vision of divine universal form.

The Gita elaborates on the central part of Hindu theology, the origin of Varnas. In Purush Sukta of Vedas Lord Brahma narrates as to how he created four Varnas from the body of Virat Purush. In Gita on similar lines Lord Krishna also tells about the divine origin of Varna's. Lord says that the fourfold order was created by him according to the divisions of quality (Guna) and work (karma).

One knows that origin of Hinduism is different from the Prophet based religions. Here there has been an evolution of the Hinduism over a period of time and today while Hinduism is a religion, Gita is its Holy Scripture. To take the stand that it is Indian philosophy and not religious one is far from truth. There is philosophy also in many a Holy Scriptures. Notwithstanding that, they are primarily religious scriptures. The verdict of the court needs re-examination as it is not conforming to the belief of millions of Hindus; neither can it stand the scrutiny of rational understanding about Hinduism as a religion. From the religion of Pastoral Aryans to the practices of Hindus today, there is a long journey. The communal forces want to introduce this text in schools as not only they want to impose Hindu nation in this country but also through this book, they aim to reinforce the concept of Varna, which is one of the core doctrine of Hinduism, and Gita tells this by attributing Varna to the divine creation by Lord Himself. While there are many a philosophical formulations in this divine book there is also the subtle defense of what the Hindutva politics wants to bring in today, Varan- Jati in a repackaged form

## The So Called Science of God-Revelation

*Yadneshwar Nigale*

Ms Uma Kulkarni had written an article on the 'Philadelphia Experiment' conducted by Dr. Franklin Reno. This article had appeared in 'Shabdasohala' (a Marathi Magazine) on the 16th of October. The word 'Shabdasohala' literally means ceremony of words. The above experiment was allegedly performed on the ship named Eldritch, during the investigation into the 'Bermuda Triangle Mystery'. Ms Kulkarni has tried to explain the mystery that is supposed to have occurred, using scientific Jargon. She explains, 'when as a part of this secret experiment, the time-plane under the influence of electromagnetic field was turned in some specific degrees, the ship disappeared; and when turned in 90 degrees the ship and the people on it lost all contact with life on earth. The ship and the things on it were wandering in different dimensions at that time. Narrow- minded persons trying to get out of that dimension jumped from the ship.' The writer alone knows what all this means but she adds even further, 'Some scientists believe that gods are beings, more advanced than human beings living on earth but living in another dimension. The dimension in which we live and the dimension of the gods meet when a specific time-plane occurs and at such occasions, things in that particular part are able to relate and become visible to one another. (This is when seeing god becomes possible).'

The writer has thus tried to explain the so called 'science' behind the phenomenon of seeing god. She has used the scientific jargon such as- Einstein's Unified Field Theory, the formula for light, electro-magnetic field, nuclear rays, etc. to explain the so called scientific foundation of god-manifestation. People take such statements gilded in scientific terms to be authentic. But they are not. It is necessary here to examine such overbearing verbose statements made by Ms Kulkarni in her article and by others elsewhere, lest gullible people are fooled by them.

The information given by the writer regarding the Philadelphia Experiment is a small part of a letter that Carlos Mingel Alende had written to an astronomer, Dr. Morris Jessup. Alende alias Carl Allen was a sailor on the Merchant Ship called Andrew Furuse. While working on this ship he saw another ship Eldritch, just disappearing from the sight; and as he reports, the same ship reappeared in the Norfolk region later. Actually he had made this statement on the basis of a news item that was published in a Philadelphia news paper. Allen had also said that during 1944-46, the Philadelphia news paper had reported that

chicken hearted men jumped off the ship. (He did not give the exact date when the news paper was published.) A book, 'The Philadelphia Experiment' was published on this tragic incident in 1979. This book was written by two authors Barliz and Moor and sold like hot cakes. A news paper clipping of this tragic incident reported earlier was also published. However this clipping does not agree with any news item published in the Philadelphia News papers around that time.

Dr. Jessup, believing in what Allen reported examined the details of the Philadelphia Experiment. He found that the two ships-one on which Allen was employed and the other on which the Philadelphia Experiment was performed came closer to each other on 16th of August 1943 but never again. But Allen reported that he saw the Philadelphia Experiment ship disappear on 28th October 1943. Dr. Jessup's investigation reveals the fallacy in Allen's report.

Moreover more astonishing is the fact that no such thing as the Philadelphia Experiment was ever carried on, on any ship. This was made clear by the American Navy. The navy also affirmed, in no uncertain terms, that not only the Philadelphia Experiment but no such other experiment was ever conducted on any ship whatsoever. In short the much talked about Philadelphia Experiment that stirred the world of the scientists so violently was actually a cock-and-bull story. Isn't it ridiculous to discuss the inferences drawn from an experiment that was never performed as has been attempted by Ms Kulkarni?

Man has been wishfully dreaming for ages, of vanishment of objects into thin air and their re-materialization. Had the alleged Philadelphia Experiment really taken place and all the events described by Allen, the sailor and the authors Barliz and Moor, also had happened, man's age-old dream too would have materialized. Dr. Franklin Reno of the Philadelphia Experiment would have been awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize! But man's dream remained a dream. No Nobel Prize for Dr. Reno. The writers who picked up the idea and elaborated on it, however, made their fortunes!

These days, some people and some institutions have appropriated the right to uphold and conserve, revive and resuscitate our ancient Bhaarateeya Culture solely to themselves. Their aim is to win over and oblige people to accept old traditions and religious concepts. They manipulate and exploit science and scientific terms to gild the obsolete ancient ideas with modern look. Take the example of Agnihotra (maintaining a sacred fire). These self styled preservers of culture insist that Agnihotra is the only and also a sure remedy for cleaning our highly polluted atmosphere. But the fact remains that burning anything,

whether sacred or otherwise is bound to emit carbon dioxide and cause pollution. Any chanting of Mantras to sanctify the material to be put into the sacred fire will not change this fact. These very people-out to preserve old traditions- had performed mobile Agnihotra, on trucks, during the Bhopal tragedy but had not cared to find out to what extent, if any, the pollution caused by the accident was reduced by the smoke stemming out of the Agnihotra. Another outlandish claim they make is that reciting the Gayatri Mantra generates certain Microwave frequencies in the body which is essential and very beneficial for human well being. One more amazingly incredible claim they make tells us in which particular direction we should perambulate round any deity. They tell us that auras get generated around all deities (i.e. the idols of the deities). These auras constantly rotate in a circle. We, therefore, should perambulate round the deity in the same direction of the auras –i.e. from the right of the deity to its left. When we do this, some particles from the aura of the deity enter our bodies and protect us from all diseases. All this propaganda, misinforming people using scientific jargon, is nothing but treachery, fooling the gullible people. Has anyone ever examined the so called aura that gets generated round a deity? Similarly the avowal of existence of a range of dimensions on the earth, of existence of life or objects in those different dimensions, vanishing of a particular time-field around objects, etc. is again nothing but an extraordinary perfidy planted on the people.

*This article was published in the Dainik Lokamat on 4th November 2005.*

## Islam and Female Circumcision

*Asghar Ali Engineer*

These days a controversy is raging about female circumcision in India among a section of Muslims (Bohras). A woman belonging to the community has sent a petition to issue a *farman* banning the practice and is also preparing a petition to be filed in the Supreme Court to issue a ban order. Many newspapers and magazines are carrying articles on the issue condemning the practice and many have approached me for interview whether it has Islamic sanction.

Needless to say it is highly controversial subject and there is no unanimity among Muslims on this question. It is not found among all Muslims but among Bohras in India and among Shafi'is in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia besides other African countries. Among Indonesian Muslims too, it is reported to be prevalent as they too are Shafi'is. But Shafi'is in

India who are found in Western Maharashtra (Kokan area), in Kerala and Tamilnadu it is not prevalent. Thus all Shafi'is also do not practice it.

Whatever it is it has African connection. It appears this originated in Africa and spread in other parts of the world. It is important to note that Imam Shafi'i lived and compiled his life mostly in Egypt and as for Bohras are concerned Cairo (Egypt) was the seat of power of Fatimid Imams and Isma'ili book of jurisprudence *Da'aim al-Islam* was written by Sayyidna Qadi al-Nu'man In Cairo during the time of 14<sup>th</sup> Imam Mu'iz. Thus among Bohras also the African connection is obvious.

As to the Question whether it has any Islamic sanction the answer falls in rather grey area. One cannot say categorically either way. Qur'an does not talk of either male or female circumcision and that is why even male circumcision is referred to sunnah or Sunnat-e-Ibrahimi or Sunnat-e Mohammadi. But in case of men it has almost considered obligatory and all Muslim sects are unanimous about it. Before Islam it was practiced by Jews and that is why it is also referred to as Sunnat-e-Ibrahimi too and according to some traditions Prophet (PBUH) adopted it from there.

While male circumcision is celebrated publicly and people are invited to public dinner female circumcision is done secretly (by those who practice it) and except family members no one comes to know about it. The hadith (tradition) cited is also considered weak by many Muslims. Thus we find in Abu Dawood (Book 41, no. 5251) that Umm Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah narrated that a woman used to perform (female) circumcision in Madina. The Prophet (PBUH) told her do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for husband.

Similarly we find in Muslim too in Book 3 no.684 Abu Musa reported. There cropped up a difference of opinion between a group of Muhajirs...He (Abu Musa the narrator) said I got up (and went) to A'isha and sought her permission and it was granted.... I said: what makes a bath obligatory for a person? You have come across one well informed! The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: when anyone sits amidst four parts and the circumcised parts touch each other a bath becomes obligatory.

We find similar hadith narrated by Abu Musa al-Ash'ari in Malik's Muwatta too. This hadith also refers to A'isha as the source. Similarly in Malik's Muwatta Book 2 Number 2.19,77 it is said Yahya related to me from Malik from Nafi' that Abdullah ibn Umar "Ehern circumcised part passes the circumcised part ghusl (bath) is obligatory.



Similarly we find in the Shafi'i source book *Reliance of the Traveller* (Umdat al-Salik) written by Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri that female circumcision is obligatory. This book has been certified by al-Azhar University. This book says "Circumcision is obligatory (both for men and women. For men it consists of removing the prepuce and for women removing the clitoris (bazz in Arabic). Hanbalis hold that circumcision of women is not obligatory but sunna.

Thus it will be seen that there is no unanimity among Muslims about female circumcision and it is found prevalent as pointed out mostly among African Muslims as among many African tribes. Whereas in case of men circumcision does not reduce sexual pleasure but is considered necessary from hygienic point of view, in case of female circumcision it reduces sexual pleasure and no hygienic function as in case of men. While men circumcision is universal among all Muslims, female circumcision, at least in practice, is confined to a few Muslim sects primarily those of African origin.

Since female circumcision interferes with woman's sexual pleasure, almost replacing old Roman chastity belt, it has become a human rights issue today. Female circumcision came into vogue to restrict her sexuality today women are demanding its abolition. It should also be noted that Islam does not, in any way seek to restrict either male or female sexuality but only restricts illegitimate sex outside marital bond and gives right to woman to seek divorce from impotent husband if he had hidden this from her at the time of marriage. This Islam fully respects woman's right to sexual pleasure as it is essential for perpetuating human progeny. It is society which, in the name of morality does so but being patriarchal in structure, does not put any restriction on male sexuality. Actually both sexes should be permitted natural sexual pleasure as it is absolutely necessary for healthy human growth but also for perpetuation of human species. Justice demands that both sexes be treated equally.

### **On Neutrinos and Angels**

*Pervez Hoodbhoy*

The news from CERN was stunning: the European nuclear science laboratory had just discovered (September 2011) that particles known as neutrinos — called so because they are neutral and carry no charge — habitually travel a little bit faster than light. This

threatened to shake the very foundations of Einstein's theory of relativity, which had laid the basis for the atomic bomb, nuclear energy, and most of modern day physics. Relativity theory starts from the postulate that the speed of light is the absolute maximum that anything can travel at.

Pakistanis are generally unmoved by developments in the world of science. But this time the excitement was palpable. A TV channel called me up, requesting an interview. Fine, I said, specifying the time when I would be available. The producer was profoundly apologetic: this was exactly when they would be interviewing Dr Zakir Naik, an Islamic scholar who frequently pontificates on issues of science and religion. Would I therefore please give another time? Since the good doctor's claim to fame is his understanding of religious texts rather than of physics, I declined and do not know what transpired subsequently.

Speed of light issues have often moved sections of religious people in rather strange ways. Way back in 1973, as a young physics lecturer at Quaid-i-Azam University, I had been fascinated by the calculation done by the head of our department. Seeking the grand synthesis of science and faith, this pious gentleman — who left on his final journey last month — had published calculations that proved Heaven (jannat) was running away from Earth at one centimeter per second less than the speed of light. His reasoning centred around a particular verse of the Holy Quran that states worship on the night of Lailat-ul-Qadr (Night of Revelation) is equivalent to a thousand nights of ordinary worship. Indeed, if you input the factor of 1,000 into Einstein's famous formula for time dilatation, this yields a number: one centimeter per second less than the speed of light!

These days the internet groans under the weight of claims that the Holy Quran had specified the speed of light 1400 years ago. Dr Mansour Hassab El Naby, said to be a physicist from Egypt, announces that according to his Quranic calculations, this speed is 299,792.5 kilometres per second. He even gives error bars! Another video gives a still more precise figure of 299792.458 km/sec. Given the unrestrained leaps of logic made by the authors, it is not surprising that they all arrive at more or less the same numbers.

Interested readers may also wish to visit an intricately-designed website that has clocked up over 750,000 visitors so far. Chockful of mathematical formulae, diagrams, and pictures, it starts from the premise that "angels are low density creatures" taking orders from a "Preserved Tablet" and says "the speed at which they commute to and from this Tablet turned out to be the known speed of light". To enhance the visual impact, the

website has a Java applet showing a white Caucasian scientist who moves his eyes up, down, and around in wondrous rapture. While doing so he sonorously pronounces — in what sounds like an Australian accent to me — that the extra space-time dimensions demanded by the physics of string theory are exactly those predicted in the Quran. The final conclusion: “Einstein’s theory of General Relativity proves the Quran right”.

Well, there’s a huge problem here! No scientist is sure that General Relativity (GR) is absolutely correct. In fact, the phrase “absolutely correct” does not belong to the lexicon of any science, even one as well developed as physics. Excellent as GR is — with hundreds of careful tests — physicists are pretty sure that there are places, such as at the edge of a black hole, where GR simply has to fail. Placing the absolute correctness of Allah’s Word on the knife-edge of an imperfect theory is pretty dicey.

Certainly, no working scientist takes seriously any of stuff on Islamic science websites. In spite of their wonderful graphics and scientific appearance, they are wholly unscientific. Science comes from persistently and patiently checking hypotheses, building upon earlier discoveries and knowledge, and systematically sifting out all which cannot pass stringent tests of logic and observation. For example, experiments at CERN consume the working lives of some of the most brilliant people on earth, require billions of dollars of equipment, and stretch human capacities and ingenuity to the limit. When real scientists eventually publish a result, it comes from solid evidence and not from uncontrolled spurts of imagination and strident assertions of faith.

Returning to neutrinos: today we do not know if the results from CERN on faster-than-light neutrinos are actually correct. Like most other particle physicists, I am sceptical. Explanations will surely be forthcoming once similar experiments are done in other laboratories; time will tell. But right or wrong, this is just another interesting puzzle for physicists to mull over. With deep foundations, the edifice of science has survived bigger earthquakes.

On the other hand, if the CERN results are right, “Islamic scientists” like Dr Naby would need to do much explaining. High above in the heavens, neutrinos would easily out-chase angels — the messengers of Allah — because, if Islamic websites are to be believed, angels are limited by the speed of light. So does that mean these naughty neutrinos are outside of God’s control? Using a holy text as a physics book makes little sense. But, sadly, it is all too common.

Worried by the cancerous growth of claptrap masquerading as science, the late Carl Sagan, one of my heroes, spoke to Bible Belt Americans with matchless eloquence:

“I worry that, especially as the Millennium edges nearer, pseudoscience and superstition will seem year by year more tempting, the siren song of unreason more sonorous and attractive. Where have we heard it before? Whenever our ethnic or national prejudices are aroused, in times of scarcity, during challenges to national self-esteem or nerve, when we agonise about our diminished cosmic place and purpose, or when fanaticism is bubbling up around us — then, habits of thought familiar from ages past reach for the controls.”

Pakistanis need to listen again, and yet again to this. Sagan is also speaking to us. *(The writer currently teaches physics and political science at LUMS (Lahore). He taught at Quaid-i-Azam University for 36 years and was head of the physics department. He received a doctorate in nuclear physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.)*

Courtesy: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/318468/on-neutrinos-and-angels/>

## Rationality Reduces Violence

Steven Pinker

I don't have a right to be speaking to you tonight; I'm a parasite. I intended to be in the audience for the award to be given to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. But when I had the opportunity to do something that might entertain you and help the Foundation, I couldn't say no.

Rebecca and I have been to all the secular, humanist and freethinker conventions and this one, by far, has the best music. Tom Lehrer, referring to the Spanish Civil War, sang “They won all the battles, but we had the best songs.” But the Freedom from Religion Foundation won all the battles and has the best songs.

I would like to explore the implications of my new book, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, for the topic that concerns all of us here, namely, religion. It's a little-appreciated fact that violence at scales large and small has been in decline for thousands of years. We may be living in the most peaceful era of our species' existence. The decline has not been smooth, to put it mildly. It hasn't brought rates of violence down to zero. And it isn't guaranteed to continue. But it is a phenomenon that can

be documented on scales from millennia to years, from world wars and genocides to the spanking of children and the treatment of animals.

The first historical decline of violence accompanied the first major transition in human history — from the small-scale anarchic bands and tribes in which our species spent most of its evolutionary history, to the first settled states with cities and governments. This resulted, according to estimates from forensic analysis of prehistoric skeletons and estimates of death rates in tribal warfare from recent hunter/gatherers, in about a five-fold decrease in the rate of violent death.

There was a subsequent decline in rates of homicide during the transition from medieval times to modernity, at least in Europe, where homicide statistics go back seven or eight centuries. A medieval Englishman had about a 35 times greater chance of being murdered than his modern descendants.

A third major transition was the Enlightenment-era humanitarian reforms: the abolition of what our Constitution calls cruel and unusual punishment. They weren't all that unusual in those days, but they were plenty cruel, including breaking on the wheel, burning at the stake, disemboweling, impalement and mutilation. These punishments were meted out for such crimes and misdemeanors as heresy, blasphemy, unconventional sexual practices, criticizing the royal garden and robbing a rabbit warren. During this humanitarian revolution, growing parts of the world saw the abolition of slavery, debt bondage, blood sports, the persecution of religious heresy and execution for frivolous reasons.

For example, in the 18th century, England had 222 capital crimes, including stealing cabbages and moral turpitude in children. By the 19th century, those had been whittled down to four. In the U.S., a majority of executions in colonial times and in the early years of the republic were for nonviolent crimes like concealing birth and counterfeiting. Even though the U.S. is an outlier compared to other western democracies and still has the death penalty, we execute people at a tiny fraction of the rate that our ancestors did.

A fourth transition is what historians call the "Long Peace." It is a remarkable and seldom-appreciated fact that since 1945, developed states have stopped going to war with each other. We take it for granted that war is something that happens in poor parts of the world. But any student of European history knows that was not always true. It was the powerful, rich, most developed states of their times that were constantly at each other's throats. That ended after World War II. Most dramatically, the two biggest superpowers, the U.S. and Russia, never fought a war directly with each other.

One might reply, “What’s so great about a Long Peace if they’re still fighting wars in poorer parts of the world?” Well, it has taken a while, but the idea that peace is better than war is spreading to the rest of the world. Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, there has been a plummeting of the number of wars and the rate of death in war all over the world. During the peak years of World War II, the worldwide rate of death was about 300 per 100,000 per year. In the late ’40s and early ’50s, it was about 20 to 25 per 100,000. In the 1960s through the 1980s, it averaged 4 per 100,000 per year. In the 1990s, it was 1.5.

In the 2000s, it’s been a half a person per 100,000 per year. So the dreams of the 1960s folk singers are starting to come true: the world is almost putting an end to war.

Finally, there are the various “rights revolutions” of the postwar period: civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights and children’s rights, and now animal rights. This has resulted in reductions in lynchings, hate crimes, rape, spousal abuse, spousal homicide, child abuse, spanking, corporal punishment in schools, laws that criminalize homosexuality, hunting, callousness to laboratory animals and the eating of meat.

### **Religion’s role**

What does any of this have to do with religion? One of the questions I am frequently asked is, “Hasn’t religion been responsible for a lot of the violence in human history?” And another is: “Hasn’t the decline of violence been pushed along by religion?”

The Better Angels of Our Nature is a book about numbers. It has a hundred graphs, and whenever I take up questions like “Was the 20th century the worst in history?” or “How bad was religion in human affairs?” I try to find numbers collected by the people called “atrocitologists” or “necromatricians.” The terms come from one of them, Matthew White, author of the highly recommended Great Big Book of Horrible Things, which reviews the hundred worst things that people have done to each other that we know of.

White recounts a friend of his musing aloud, “I wonder what percentage of the world’s suffering has been caused by religion?” He answered, “Ten percent.” White had calculated the death tolls from various causes such as greed, exploitation, decadent emperors and megalomaniac conquerors, and estimated that about 47 million deaths over the course of history can be attributed to religion. Now, of course, defenders of religion can say, “We’re responsible for no more than 10% of the world’s mass murders!” ; but given the pretensions of religion to be a force for peace, to have caused 10% needs a little bit of explaining.

Religious “multicides,” as White calls them, are easy to find. If we consider the events narrated in the bible to be not literally true but as recording common practices of the time, then we find one genocide after another, many of them commanded by Yahweh, who generally commands the Israelites to massacre every last man, woman and child, though he sometimes allows them to spare the attractive young women so they could rape them and take them as wives.

The New Testament, for its part, is a valorization of the practice of human sacrifice. This custom was exercised with relish by all of the early states and civilizations, some of which placated their gods by massacring people by the hundreds of thousands, generally after a long period of torture. The theory of causation was that the world is full of nasty surprises, like wars, pestilence and famine. What kind of a god would create a world like that? It must be a bloodthirsty god. Maybe if we satisfy him by killing people proactively, we’ll save ourselves from being his next victim.

Human sacrifice did die out in most civilizations. Judaism was founded in large part on the rejection of human sacrifice: goats and cattle took the place of children. But human sacrifice did survive in one of the breakaway sects of Judaism. The basis of Christianity is that the most wonderful event in human history, the “Good News,” was an instance of human sacrifice: God allowed an innocent man to be tortured to death in exchange for not visiting a worse fate on the rest of humanity.

Incidentally, when someone today complains about violent entertainment, such as video games or Hollywood splatter flicks, they should look at the lives of the martyred saints, described with pornographic relish in the early hagiographies. They are by far the most revolting, prurient form of violent entertainment I have ever seen. The early saints were depicted as having been subjected to hideous torture and mutilation, much of it sexualized.

### **From the Crusades on**

The Crusades killed an estimated 1 million people, mostly Jews and Muslims. The world’s population at the time was one-sixth of what it was in the middle of the 20th century. That works out on a prorated per capita rate to about 6 million deaths, a number which has a chilling resonance.

The European Wars of religion, such as the 80 Years’ War, the English Civil War, the 30 Years’ War, and the French Huguenot War, were among the bloodiest events in history. The 30 Years’ War in Germany had a death toll that, adjusted for the world’s population,

was greater than the death rate in World War I and approaches that of World War II in Europe.

Then there was the annihilation of native peoples, especially Native Americans, who were often given the choice to convert or die. Sometimes the choice was recited to them in Latin. Oddly enough, they did not see the light. When the Pequot Indians in New England were exterminated, the Protestant minister Increase Mather offered a prayer thanking God for sending 600 heathen souls to hell. This did not hurt his career: He went on to become the president of Harvard University.

Many faculty at Harvard are affiliated with a residential house; I'm affiliated with one named after him. I asked the master of Mather House if it was named after Cotton or Increase. She said, "Oh, Increase, for sure — I know that because our motto is 'Increase Mather's spirit.' "

Many of the humanitarian reforms of the Enlightenment were vigorously opposed by the Catholic Church. One of the most important, liberating books in human history was Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). Beccaria laid out a meticulous case against torture as a form of criminal punishment, which laid the rationale for the criminal justice system we have today, with its graded series of punishments calibrated to the severity of the crime, rather than using torture, mutilation, and execution for even the most frivolous offense. Beccaria reasoned that if you mete out a severe punishment for a minor crime, anyone who commits a minor crime will figure, "Well, I may as well commit a major crime. I'm going to get punished the same anyway." Beccaria argued that instead of prescribing horrific punishments and applying them unpredictably, a criminal justice system should set up deterrents designed to reduce the aggregate amount of violence. And to do so, it's better to have small, reliable punishments than horrific, unpredictable ones. His treatise was placed on the papal index of forbidden books.

### **Superstition and ideology**

Why did religion so often lead to violence, instead of preventing it? There are a number of reasons.

One is the perpetuation of superstition. If you believe that there is a cruel god whose thirst for blood must be regularly slaked; if you believe Jews killed Jesus; if you believe that children are possessed by the devil, which must be beaten out of them; if you believe that God created a hierarchy of races; if you believe that soulless animals were put on Earth for humans to exploit; if you believe homosexuality is a sin — then you have plenty of moral



reasons why violence is not only permissible but mandatory. As Voltaire said, “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”

Another dangerous feature of many religions is a utopian ideology (a feature shared with certain nonreligious ideologies that have licensed vast amounts of violence, such as Nazism and communism).

One might ask, “Who could be against utopia? Granted, a utopia may not be practical for all kinds of practical reasons, but shouldn’t our reach exceed our grasp? Wouldn’t 10% of a perfect world be better than what we have now?” The answer is no, for two reasons.

First, if you have a belief system that holds out the prospect of infinite good, then you can commit arbitrary amounts of violence in pursuit of this infinitely good world, and you’re always ahead of the game. The benefits exceed the costs; the ends justify the means. Second, if you’re convinced that you have the formula for obtaining infinite good forever, and there are people who learn about your plan and oppose it, then how evil are they? They are the obstacle to an infinitely good world. Which means that they are arbitrarily evil, and deserving of arbitrarily severe punishment.

That’s why demonizing, utopian ideologies led to many of the largest death tolls in history. A common meme circulating among opponents of the New Atheism and defenders of religion as a source of morality is that atheistic regimes of the 20th century killed far more people than religion. Well, that’s probably true. Perhaps 70 to 80 million people were killed by communist regimes, and only 40 million by religion. But is coming in only at second place (or third, or fourth) in history’s list of great atrocities really something to be proud of? In any case, the “atheist regime” meme is propagandistic and highly misleading. For one thing, Nazism wasn’t an atheistic movement. Hitler wasn’t an atheist, and many Nazi leaders were devout Christians.

Indeed one prominent movement, documented in Stieglman-Gall’s *The Holy Reich*, fused Nazism and Christianity. More importantly, neither Nazism nor communism defined their ideologies as a rejection of God; they were defined in terms of race and class conflict. It’s only a religious mindset that divides political systems into those that believe in the Judeo-Christian God and those that don’t. It is no more sensible than dividing belief systems into those that are Zoroastrian and those that aren’t, or those who believe in astrology and those who don’t.

There's a clear divide between toxic and benevolent belief systems. The toxic ones posit a utopia, together with demons that stand in the way. Some of these demonizing ideologies are religious, some are not. The more benevolent ones, which grew out of the Enlightenment but had roots in ancient Greece, one can call classical liberalism, enlightenment humanism or secular humanism.

### **Charting the trends**

It was an appreciation of Enlightenment humanism that gave me something of a coherent narrative for the historical trends that I document. It seems spooky that so many historical trends seem to be pushing in the same direction. Why, at the same time as states stopped waging war with each other, did they also decriminalize homosexuality and stop spanking their children? You can imagine a history in which some trends went in one direction and others went in the opposite direction. Why does there seem to be an arrow pointing away from violence in the course of human history? Some people even see it as a vindication of the idea of divine purpose — though that raises the question of why the divine agent allowed so many people to be tortured and slaughtered in the first place. If you're a divine planner, why not build peace in from the start?

It is fitting that I am the warmup act for Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, because it was she that shaped the line of thinking that allowed me to make sense of all the history I review. Rebecca is an analytic philosopher, a scholar of modern Western philosophy — of Spinoza in particular, but also a fan of David Hume and of Bertrand Russell. And she showed me that there is a coherent moral system that comes out of a commitment to rationality and objectivity.

It begins by making sense of the word "ought." What ought we to do? How ought we to arrange our affairs? There's something in nature of logic that is going to push you in the moral direction. As soon as you're part of a community of rational agents interacting with one another, you can no longer say that my needs, my goals, my interests are special just because I'm me and you're not, at least not if you want anyone to take you seriously. That means that is impossible to justify a rationale for exploitative violence: for rape, for colonial conquest, for torture as a form of entertainment, for war insensitive to its human costs. These rationales start to evaporate as a society organizes itself along rational lines. And that is our best interpretation of the great arrow in the sky that seems to be pointing peaceward.

I'm not a philosopher; I got most of my philosophy from Rebecca. I'm a social scientist, so I look for cause and effect in the empirical world. My professional question is not whether there is a rational pathway that leads away from violence, but how our not-always-so-rational species has been able to find it. The best answers I came up with are that certain material and cultural changes have allowed humans to better approximate the rational ideal over the course of history.

Enlightenment projects such as universal literacy, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of movement with its cosmopolitan mixing of people, and universal education, have haltingly, lurchingly, slowly, with lots of local reversals and exceptions, managed to get people to reason their way out of superstition and ignorance and to see the follies of the tribalism and deference to authority and puritanism that are part of human nature.

Over time, as these rational facilities were honed in the crucible of debate and free speech, more and more of the world realized that nonviolence was really a more rational way to organize our affairs.

*(Steven Pinker, published extensively in the fields of linguistics and experimental psychology, taught at MIT for 21 years and now is Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard. He is a 2004 Emperor Has No Clothes award recipient. Along with The Better Angels of Our Nature (2011, available for \$40 from [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop)), his books include The Language Instinct (1994), How the Mind Works (1997), The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature (2002), and The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature (2007).*

*This is an edited transcript of a speech given Oct. 7, 2011, at FFRF's 34th national convention in Hartford, Conn. Online audio is at [ffrf.org/outreach/convention/](http://ffrf.org/outreach/convention/). Pinker, a Harvard University evolutionary psychologist, is an Honorary Director of FFRF and is married to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, who accepted a Freethought Heroine award from FFRF the same evening.)*

## **A Code of Conduct for Rationalists**

*Prabhakar Kamath*

A rationalist's approach to educating the deluded masses should be rational and not emotional.

*Many rationalists are so incensed by the behavior of the religious fanatics that they become emotional in their retort. Emotional reaction invariably diminishes the logic of the rationalist. Very often the rationalists have their own emotional baggage, which comes in the way of calm, rational approach to addressing this problem.*

A rationalist should have been born in the same religion that he wants to reform or undermine.

*A Hindu rationalist cannot reason with a Muslim religionist and vice versa. His wisdom will be immediately discounted by virtue of the fact that he is of another religion.*

For a rationalist to succeed in converting fanatics of his former religion, he must first show his authority on the scriptures of that religion, which are the basis of irrational beliefs and rituals.

*The authority to change other people's beliefs comes only to those people who have demonstrated high level of knowledge on the subject they are talking about. If the rationalist knows little about the scriptures, those who claim to know more than him would discount his ideas. A "Brahmin" rationalist who has mastered the scriptures has far better chance of showing the fraud of scriptures than a non-Brahmin who does not even have a rudimentary knowledge of them. It took Gorbachov, an ultimate insider, to topple Communism in Russia. It took Nixon, an ultimate conservative, to change the attitude of Americans toward Chinese. One has to be an insider to show the irrationality of a given religion.*

A rationalist must undermine the scriptures by giving concrete examples of fraud by vested interests, not just being dismissive of them off hand.

*More often than not, a rationalist just gives his opinion about the wrongfulness of the delusion of religious people. This means he is entitled to his opinion and the religionist is entitled to his. End of progress.*

A rationalist should resort to Constitutional measures to bring the fanatics to justice when they indulge in hateful behavior towards dissidents.

*Deluded fanatics are obviously irrational people whose Constitution is their religion. They are living in the past. Religion was the Constitution (LAW, DHARMA) in the ancient times. Now we have a Constitution of the Nation, applicable to all religions. Rationalist's approach should be strictly Constitutional and rational.*

Courtesy:

<http://www.carvaka4india.com/2012/02/code-of-conduct-for-rationalists.html>

## Superstition, You Bet

*Joe Williams*

Superstitions are an inherent part of any sport, with racing being no exception. But many in this fraternity might feel that all that is required for a horse to win is good pedigree, conformation and preparation, besides the crucial component of ability.

But in horse racing, many owners, punters and others believe they need to do more. For some, it is to sit at the same place, or wear the same dress they had worn when their horses first tasted success.

India's biggest race horse owner, MAM Ramaswamy insists on wearing the tie he has worn for the last 30 years whenever his horses run in classic races. Ramaswamy's tally of classic wins is a staggering 500-plus.

Last year, Jacqueline set a new record by winning four Indian classics in a row. Two of the part owners, Berjis Minoo Desai and Deepa Dhunjibhoy, wore the same dress on all four occasions and also sat at the same place when the race was run.

Vivek Jain, chairman of the Royal Western Indian Turf Club, does not believe in superstition, but feels that his horse stands fewer chances when its serial number is 8 or drawn in 8. "When my horse is drawn 8 or its serial number is 8, I feel that he/she stands less chance of winning. Apart from this I have nothing," says Jain.

"No, I don't believe in that. The only thing that is on my mind when my horse is there is his/her previous outing," Vijay Shirke told DNA. For a non-believer, some of the practices may appear bizarre, but then this is what drives most race-goers.

But, it more among the punters, has won consistently during a day, he would look at what transpired during the day and try to duplicate the same process the next day. It is seen often that punters change places for each race to improve their 'vaastu'. Still others hold on to the same seat if his/her choice wins

"I see that I occupy the same place when my choice horse is winning. If it does not, I keep changing my seat for better luck," says Ronny Perreira, one of the punters on the race course.

There are those too, who keep on changing seats whenever their choice horse wins. "If I have placed a bet on the first floor and win, I will come down for the next bet," says Suresh Gaikwad, another punter.

There are other options, such as keeping the ticket in the wallet or in the racing books. Many punters believe that sharing information may bring them bad luck and are rarely honest about their intentions on race day

Indian race-goers don't count their profits before the end of day's racing, nor do they announce when they make money, which is rare. Another superstition is to avoid meeting a particular person who they think brings bad luck, or shaking hands, lest their good luck is passed on.

Courtesy: DNA dated Jan 29, 2012

### Bunch of Thoughts

*Keshava Shet Revankar*

This article is an attempt to show the parallel between Anna Hazare of Jan Lok Pal {JLP} Bill and Krishna of Bhagavad Gita. Anna Hazare belongs to Mahratta caste and is being supported by the Saffron outfit called BJP., who primed him with a slogan "Jan Lok Pal" {JLP} and using him as a spiritual Leader to come to power. Krishna who belongs to Yadava Caste was a folk- hero darling of milkmaids and later became a shrewd, flamboyant ,manipulative politician among Aryan kings.{ If at all this is History }. His name is used by the pariwar of Vaidic/sanskrit scholars, promoted him as vishnu's Avatar with devine power and put words in his mouth to implement their agenda through the document-BG-..The circumstances too are similar While the Sangh wants to grab power by hook or crook, the Vaidic Purohitshahi wanted to perpetuate the Brhaminic supremacy over the entire Hindu society and to claim of their Purity.

After the banishment of Buddhism Hindu society became increasingly supernatural-centered society-- lured by abstract, magical, and divine approved Brahminic ceremonial purity. Such a society provides a fertile ground for mushroom like growth of charlatans, Babas of double Sri types, fake spiritual Gurus, Predator--Astrologers, Self deluding Yoga-packages and ever increasing priestly-shenanigans. Modern science has placed in their hands gadgets like cell-phones etc., but the minds are firmly set in the medieval times.

The evils of mankind are caused by the Individual's self--transcending identification with groups whose common denominator is low intelligence and high emotionality {Arthur Koestler}. Anna Hazare found at the right time, a self-transcending cause of ' corruption'

and got the backing of such groups who were fueled by a political force called " Saffron Outfit"

Just before Anna announced his resolve of Fasting, he was accosted by a lady reporter from a TV channel. During the conversation he was heard uttering, as though mumbling to himself, a few words from Bhagavad Gita ----"Sambhawami.....Yuge Yuge "Krishna had said that whenever Evil becomes predominant He will appear millinium after millinium to restore morality. Krishna never came even after 3500 years as promised. Perhaps Anna Saheb might have thought to himself that has now the right to do something Big.

As regards Anna Hazare he comes from a humble background of Mahratta caste, joined Army, came out and settled in his village Ralegan Siddhi. Seeing the conditions in the village his Army discipline prompted him to bring about some reform.. Hundred others, men and women did become sensitive to social issues and have done significant service in the rural areas. Anna Hazare took up issue of corruption and found success in a few cases of corruption in his state. One significant fact is that all the while he was leading an absolutely simple life , may be reading Bhagavad Gita in Marathi and taking part in singing Bhajans. in a temple. This has created a halo around him and people started touching his feet wherever he went.

When the mega--corruption cases came to light and the Govt. succeeded in sending half a dozen prominent men behind bars, the saffron front were frantic to snatch some credit to themselves and found Anna the right choice to stage a huge agitation. They unleashed their cadre of RSS and ABVP to mobilise and bring Anna on the national Arena. Thus a team of Father, Son, Holy Ghost and two archangels was formed which created a high decibel cacophony with the Mantra J.L.P bill to give an impression to the masses that this will banish corruption overnight.

The overflowing of self -righteousness becomes Hubris of spiritual kind which has made Anna Saheb loose his track and his later utterances showed that he has lost his mind also.. There are 70000 villages like his village which are dens of superstitions and a large section of society in towns and villages has sunk to a frightening depth of obscurantism in recent past. He should realise that corruption is ingrained in the Hindu-Psyche. From childhood to the grave Hindu has to bribe Gods through Priests, for every desire and problem, and every God has given a package of rituals to the priests. Marking of Hindutva on the forehead has become a fashion, so much so, that in a few years it is feared that their grey--cells may turn Saffron.

Let me quote what Dr. Prabhakara Kamath, a practicing psychiatrist in U.S.A. last 40 years, has written in website 'nirmukta' in march 2011. "Since God is invisible, first made him visible making an idol of him {what is *Maya*, the cosmic illusion is brought down and formed into a legion of deities by our crafty Purohiths} put him on a pedestal and built a structure over him to protect him from nature. In the morning wake him up from sleep by ringing bells and beating drums. Then bathe him with *abhisheka*, deoderize him with sandal wood paste, dress him with silk *pithambara*, adorn him with flowers and jewels, entertain him with songs and dance routine, praise him with mantras and *bhajans*, warm him with Aarthi, feed him with rice, coconuts and bananas, offer him smoke of *yajna*, take him for a ride on palanquins and chariots, bribe him with donations so on and so forth. If these activities are not plain Stupid what is ? Thus deluded by brahminic shenanigans millions of people visit these Temple--casinos hoping in vain that these Gods would some how fulfill their desires and protect them from evils of life. And the Brahmins operating these Temple--casino--complexes are having a good laugh at the stupid people lining up to get a *darshan* of their stone idols while the priests are lining their own deep pockets with cash. " It is disgusting to well adorned modern rich ladies bringing home made butter and curds and smearing them on the stone "Phallus" in shiva temples. .Most of the ancient tribals were worshipping both male and female reproductive Symbols in stone as fertility rites Hebrew Heathen Religion-- Chap. 8 describes the cult in full details. Later this "linga" of Hebrew tribes became the symbol of their supreme God "Yehwa' In India people are still practicing tribal cults.

Since Anna Saheb is not able to read Bhagavad Gita with critical insight, only 'Sambhawami Yuge yuge' inspired him. It is necessary to know the truth. Renowned historian Damodhar Dharmanand Kosambi has this conclusion "Gita with all its brilliant sanskrit and superb Inconsistencies is a book that allows the reader to justify almost any action while shrugging off its consequences" Even though some upanishadic profound thoughts are scattered here and there, there are ambiguities and contradictions galore. Listing them chapter by chapter is out of scope of this article. Only a few are mentioned here.

First chapter itself is a 'License' to kill to Arjun. Bhagavad Gita rationalizes and justifies killing of one's near and dear ones glorifying the duty of a *kshatriya*. What a pervert philosophy to come from a divinity. All the saints and Prophets spoke of Humanity as one but Bhagavad Gita justifies Genocide. In chap.4:13 Krishna says" Even though I



created "Chatur Varna" {Four Castes} I can not "Roll Back " giving a eternal warranty clause to the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*. The consequences were tragic. The four castes divided into thousands of castes. Division always brings conflicts. Thus we see now thousand conflicts, thousand loyalties, and thousand mutinies. Chatur Varna killed communion within each caste and across castes. Community building was rarely seen in India. As individuals become self-centered their concern is only for own family and their gods. Krishna's Chatur Varna erased egalitarianism and compassion within castes and between castes. Shudras were made to obey the Divine mandate that there is salvation in servitude.(chap.18:44) As they can not dream of a better life their creativity and productivity got destroyed over time. As each caste followed their caste--occupation (kula Dharma) and Kula Deva,[Family Deity] what was inherited at birth got transmitted to the blood-line and this became part of the person himself. These castes remained stagnant for centuries. That is how social "Entropy" increased Even if the State injects crores and crores of money state could not bring about negative Entropy.

Krishna tells in chap.9:32-33 that women, Shudras and Vaishyas are of sinful origin{ Papa Yoni} They have to surrender to him and sing Bhajans all their life to deserve a place in His Abode (Vaikunta). But Brahmins and Kshatriyas were already blessed. The author forgot that these two are also born to women. How absurd is this?

Hazare should now go round the country and exhort Hindus not to bribe the Gods. Instead of mixing Bhajans with politics and making it a cocktail of spiritual fascisms he should pray to gods to divest their hoarded gold and cash worth a trillion Rs. for the welfare of the poor. He should realise that no other people in the world spend so much money, time and energy on an illusion of immortality created by Brahminism.

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# THOUGHT & ACTION

Committed to Build



Rationalist Society

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## **Rashtrapita Jotiba Phule and Satyashodhak Samaj**

Rashtrapita Jotiba Phule during his social movement of initial 15 years had been propagating his views, preaching at public meetings, through leaflets and booklets the importance of education and exhorting the lower castes to educate their children and to redeem themselves from the evil customs, wicked prejudices and wily precepts imposed on them in the name of God by the Brahmin priests and their religious works. Jotirao resolved now to launch a movement in Maharashtra for liberation of lower castes from Brahmin thralldom. Awakening self-respect in the peasants and toiling masses, he infused courage in them to stand up against the poverty and social injustice and against the oppressive, unjust and inhuman Hindu priest craft and the caste system. His writings and his speeches focused Government attention on the grievances of the peasants and of the workers engaged by Government Engineering and Public works Department.

### **Action by Jotirao**

Jotirao wanted now to organise his followers and workers so that they might assimilate his rational ideas and bring them into effect. He strove hard to raise the Ati-Shudras to the level of the Shudras. He repeatedly said to his followers that lost rights are not secured without a struggle. Jotirao knew that the Brahmins are not only unsympathetic but also intolerant and that the tradition-mongers would not easily give up their privileges, position and power. There was no question of their expecting to get any political rights as they had no strength and organization behind them. So Jotiba decided to set up an organization to preach his ideology. Accordingly Jotirao convened on September 24, 1873, a meeting of all his admirers and disciples at Poona. About sixty men from many important centres of Maharashtra state assembled. Jotirao made an introductory speech and explained the necessity of a central institution for the guidance of the movement. After some discussion and several other speeches, it was agreed to form an institution. Jotirao named this institution as Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seeking Society)

Jotirao was elected first president and treasurer of the Satya Shodhak Samaj and Narayanrao Govindrao Kadalak was elected as its first secretary. The main objects of the Samaj were:

- 1) To redeem the Shudras and Ati-Shudras from the influence of Brahmanical scriptures under which the Brahmin priests fleeced them to make them conscious of their human rights and to liberate them from mental and religious slavery.
- 2) All men are the children of one god, who is thus their parent

3) There is no requirement of intermediary such as priest or a preceptor to approach the mother or father to offer his prayer to god.

A member at Satya Shodhak Samaj had to take an oath in the name of god Khanderao and declare his allegiance to British rule. Membership of the Samaj was extended to all the castes including Mahars, Mangs, Jews and Muslims. The weekly meetings were held on Sundays at the places where branches of the satya shodhak Samaj were established. The subjects discussed were

1. The necessity of the temperance and compulsory education.
2. Encouragement of Swadeshi goods.
3. Dislodging the Brahmin priest from the position he held in the religious field.
4. Making arrangements for performing marriage at minimum expenses
5. Freeing men from the beliefs in astrology, ghosts and demons.
6. The main attack was upon the caste system and idol-worship.
7. Emphasis was also on the principle of the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of Man.

### **Reaction by Brahmins**

The Brahmins, desiring to destroy the movement in its early stage, began to propagate their views against the Samaj. They brought pressure upon the villagers not to be the members of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. Those who became members were harassed and some of them lost their jobs in government service as Brahmins used to be their Government supervisors. Narayan Kadalkar, the secretary of the Satya Shodhak Smaj too was transferred to Mahabaleshwar. Also Shudras were told that if they performed their ceremonies without Brahmins their families would be extinct or would perish on account of the curses of Brahmins and their Gods. Some of the Brahmins started different Samaj. Arya Samaj was formed in 1875 to counter Satya Shodhak Samaj. Other Samaj like Brahmo Samaj, Prayer Samaj were also formed during this period to counter Satya Shodhak Samaj activities. Though Brahmo Samaj believed that all men were the children of one God, only Brahmins were allowed to officiate as priests and attend Brahmo Samaj meetings. It was told that the Brahmo Samaj was a holy preserve and privilege and should not be contaminated by non-brahmins.

This devastating criticism is all the more valid in the Hindu religion, because here clever brahmins had loaded farmers backs with selfish interests, under the garb of religion. Out of their hatred for shudras, the brahmins prevented resurgence of shudras by creating religion based hierarchical caste system and imposed sacredness, out of the fear that some day shudras would rise again to challenge

the brahmin supremacy, they banned teaching to shudras altogether. The ban on the education of the lower castes resulted in the illiterate women and the shudras losing their reasoning faculty and acquiring faith in worthless stories in Harivijay, etc., and following pilgrimage, worshipping Satyanarayan and chanting Gods` name million times a day.

### **Work of Satya Shodhak Samaj**

The main objectives of the organisation were to liberate the Shudras and Ati Shudras and to prevent their exploitation by the upper caste like Brahmins. Through this Satya Shodhak Samaj, Jotirao refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct. He opposed idolatry and denounced the chaturvarnya system (the caste system). Satya Shodhak Samaj propounded the spread of rational thinking and rejected the need for a Brahman priestly class as educational and religious leaders. He vehemently opposed worthless rituals and any intermediary between god and person. Satya Shodhak Samaj believed neither in the caste system nor in the basic four-fold division of society. Satya Shodhak Samaj lacked the support of major intellectuals. Their philosopher were simple and honest peasant. Their language was the language of the people, their places of propaganda were the corn-gathering places.

According to SatyaShodhak Samaj, existence of God was replaced by Nirmik, the creator. SatyaShodhak Samaj propounded the spread of rational thinking and rejected the need for a Brahman priestly class as educational and religious leaders. Phule, in an attempt to explain caste oppression, turned the Aryan theory of race upside down. Brahmins were cruel and violent invaders who had overturned an originally prosperous and egalitarian society. Brahman rule, supported by state power and religious hegemony, was seen as the root cause of oppression for the lower-caste indigenous masses.

Jotiba firmly believed that if you want to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity, economic justice and value devoid of exploitation, you will have to overthrow the old, unequal and exploitative social system and the values on which it is based. Knowing this well, Jotiba attacked blind faith and faith in what is given in religious books and the so-called gods words. He tore to pieces the misleading myths that were ruling over the minds of women, shudras and ati-shudras. Yielding to god or fate, astrology and other such rituals, sacredness, god-men, etc. was deemed irrational and absurd.

He also led campaigns to remove the economic and social handicaps that breed blind faith among women, shudras and ati-shudras. Jotiba subjected religious texts and religious behavior to the tests of rationalism. He characterised this faith as outwardly religious but in essence politically motivated

movements. He accused them of upholding the teachings of religion and refusing to rationally analyse religious teachings. He maintained that at the root of all calamities was the blind faith that religious books were created or inspired by god. Therefore, Phule wanted to abolish this blind faith in the first instance. All established religious and priestly classes find this blind faith useful for their purposes and they try their best to defend it. He questions if there is only one God, who created the whole mankind, why did he write the Vedas only in Sanskrit language despite his anxiety for the welfare of the whole mankind? What about the welfare of those who do not understand this language? Phule concludes that it is untenable to say that religious texts were God-created. To believe so is only ignorance and prejudice. All religions and their religious texts are man-made and they represent the selfish interest of the classes, which are trying to pursue and protect their selfish ends by constructing such books. Phule was the only sociologist and humanist in his time that could put forth such bold ideas. In his view, every religious book is a product of its time and the truths it contains have no permanent and universal validity. Again these texts can never be free from the prejudices and the selfishness of the authors of such books. Through his writings and activities Mahatma Phule always condemned Brahmanism and the privileged status of priests in it. He openly condemned the inequality in the religious books, orthodox nature of religion, exploitation of masses by the means of it, blind and misleading rituals, and hypocrisy in the prevalent religion.

He advocates gender equality, opposes hierarchical superiority and propagates honesty and conscientious behavior. There is no sin and no other world and no cycle of births after this life. Man had to use his rational faculty to go through life. He attacked astrology and Vastushastra.

Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. To him blind faith eradication formed part of a broad socioeconomic transformation. This was his strategy for ending exploitation of human beings. Mere advice, education and alternative ways of living are not enough, unless the economic framework of exploitation comes to an end.

**Dress of Preacher**

The dress of the preacher of Satya Shodhak Samaj consisted of a blanket, a turban and a dhoti along with a drum in his hand. He referred to their debts to injunctions and rites the peasants suffered from and told them how the little money they had was drained away by the cunning and selfish Brahmin priests!. He urged them to send their children to schools so that they might learn what was law, what was religion, what was god. They were men of farmers stock and they could not bring to their task learning and reason, although they displayed much energy and earnestness!

Jotiraos institution struggled for the uplift of the masses. The Satya Shodhak Samaj was thus the first institution to launch a social movement in modern India. It raised its voice against social slavery and demanded social justice. It was the shrill voice of a long-suppressed people in India.

### **Deenbandhu, the mouthpiece of the Satya Shodhak Samaj**

Deenbandhu, the mouthpiece of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, played an important role in Satya Shodhak Samaj's movement. Deenbandhu weekly articulated the grievances of the peasants and workers. Deenbandhu defended Jyotirao when Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, a powerful spokesman of the conservative nationalists, attacked Jyotiraos writing in the most vitriolic style. Narayan Meghaji Lokhande was another prominent colleague of Jyotirao. Lokhande is acclaimed as the Father of Trade Union Movement in India. From 1880 onwards, he took over the management of Deenbandhu which was published from Bombay. Deenbandhu, had protested against the restrictions on the right to freedom of the press. Jyotirao did not like the idea of spending the money of the taxpayers in honoring a guest like Lytton. He boldly suggested that the amount could be very well spending on the education of the poor people in Poona. He was the only member out of all the thirty-two nominated members of the Poona Municipality who voted against the official resolution.

### **Merger into Congress party**

After Jotibas death in 1890, there was a period of lull, when the flame lit by Jotiba waned. His movement was kept alive by Shahu Maharaj, Krantisinha Nana Patil and many other leaders after him. On her death bed Phule is rumored to have turned to his wife and said You must carry on our work with the same determination and spirit. The Satya Shodhak Samaj movement was totally a social movement and nothing to do with the politics, but the members of Satya Shodhak Samaj dissolved Satya Shodhak Samaj.

### **Work by Shahu Maharaj**

Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur princely state, gave a lot of financial and moral support and Satya Shodhak Samaj in its new incarnation as non-brahmin party carried on the work of superstition removal vigorously. Two instances from the lives of two devoted leaders of Satya Shodhak Samaj in this period can be cited at the outset. The first of these relates to the life of Bhaskarrao Jadhav, the veteran non-brahmin leader. When Shahu Maharaj, who was humiliated in the Vedokta controversy, had set up Kshatra Jagatguru, Bhaskarrao opposed the move. On top of it, when all leaders including Shahu Maharaj saluted kshatra Jagatguru, Bhaskarrao boldly declared that being a Satya Shodhak he could not bow his head before any religious leaders. Ideas of Satya Shodhak Samaj defy not just brahmin heads of religion, but also the whole institution of priesthood and the caste system based on inequality by birth. This is because at the root of the caste system is the superstition that

sponsors the feelings of superiority of higher castes and the feelings of inferiority of lower castes. If superiority of brahmin is replaced by superiority of the kshatriyas or even if brahmins and kshatriyas are on par with each other, it would not remove this superstition. The second instance relates to a strong and successful worker of Satya Shodhak Samaj, Once Shahu Maharaj had called Baburao Yadav for some work but he was very late in turning up. Naturally Maharaj asked him about the delay. Baburao took Maharaj to the balcony and from that balcony he pointed the bullock-carts resting at a distance. Maharaj could not understand the point. Soon, however Maharaj saw that Baburao Yadav's bullock cart was full of red coloured stones of different sizes. Maharaj further asked Yadav to explain how his late coming was related to those stones. Then Yadav explained, Sir I was delayed in reaching your palace because on the way I collected all these stones anointed with red sindhur, as these so called gods sitting on the boundaries of the village farms were responsible for converting villagers into stones! I collected all of them in my cart. That is why I was delayed in reaching here. These two instances reveal how Satya Shodhak Samaj had created the psyche against blind faith from top to bottom of the movement. Jotiba firmly believed that if you want to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity, economic justice and value devoid of exploitation, you will have to overthrow the old, unequal and exploitative social system and the values on which it is based. Knowing this well, Jotiba attacked blind faith and faith in what is given in religious books and the so-called gods words. He tore to pieces the misleading myths that were ruling over the minds of women, shudras and ati-shudras. Yielding to god or fate, astrology and other such rubbish rituals, sacredness, god-men, etc. was deemed irrational and absurd. This was explained by giving innumerable examples.

#### Work by Savitribai Phule

When Phule established the Satya Shodhak Samaj, Savitribai became the head of the womens section which included ninety female members. Moreover, she worked tirelessly as a school teacher for girls. Deenbandhu publication, the mouthpiece of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, played an important role in Satya Shodhak Samaj's movement. After Jotiba's death in 1890 his spirited followers went on spreading the movement to the remotest parts of Maharashtra. Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur princely state, gave a lot of financial and moral support to Satya Shodhak Samaj. In its new incarnation party carried on the work of superstition removal vigorously.





## Temple Building: Lucrative Business

*Yadneshwar Nigale*

A member of the cabinet of Manohar Parrikar withdrew his support from the Government. He was accused of extracting commission from various contractors. He had built temples at many places with his ill gotten riches. While criticising the wily ways of this minister, the Chief Minister Mr. Manohar Parrikar stated, 'Utilizing the ill-gotten wealth for building temples does not secure any 'Punya' (moral or religious merit) for the builder.' The Chief Minister deserves to be congratulated for publicly stating the stark truth. His statement, however, seems to assume that temples are built for accumulating religious merit. There was a time in the Peshava Period or somewhat earlier, in the history of Maharashtra, when brave warriors and pious women like Ahilyabai Holkar built temples with the intention of acquiring religious merit and also serving the needs of the people. But in the present day the temple builders and builders of prayer houses do not aspire to gather 'Punya'. Their aim and object is simply and solely making money.

Recently Mr. Sharad Bedekar a progressive writer wrote an article on temple building, throwing light on how the illegal business is quietly carried out. It has become a lucrative business for the unemployed men. This is how the business starts. To begin with, an idol of a revered deity is placed under a Banyan tree or at the bend of a road. Alternatively the picture of the deity or the picture of a much revered saint is hung on the wall, at a suitable place which is much frequented by passersby. The surrounding place is cleaned up and the deity or the saint is worshiped with flower garlands, burning lamp, frankincense, etc. This makes way for building a small dome or cupola over the deity. Next the surrounding area is tiled even encroaching upon the road. No one objects. Gradually the dome is converted into a small and later a biggish temple. No law can come in its way. Thus one more dwelling is offered to the god who already has several of them in addition to his heavenly abode. Likewise a Darga, a Mosque or a Church also can be built at any street corner. One, who constructs the edifice, naturally becomes its owner and can carry on his business unhindered. No education, no other qualification and no license, nothing is necessary to start the business.

Many dilapidated temples spread over the countryside need to be renovated. The devotees in the surrounding areas are keen to get the job done. Some shrewd people readily take the initiative and not only renovate the old structure but also extend it. Then they make a trust for the bigger and renovated temple, reserving all the rights regarding the temple with the trustees i.e. they themselves and their progeny after them. Rumours are spread that the deity is 'Jagrit' (awake, attentive and heedful of the devotees' needs). So and so became prosperous because of the deity's blessings; some other person got a son after praying the deity and still another was absolved of the

criminal charges made against him, etc. The rumours swell as they pass from person to person and the deity becomes proportionately popular, multiplying the temple's income. Owning a temple has become a symbol of prosperity like owning a modern commercial complex. It is also a symbol of one's status, prestige and influence. Highly ambitious temple builders use the popularity and the influence earned through the temple, to dig their feet in the political arena. The devotees, on the other hand who make the temple prosperous are not necessarily well-to-do. The irony of the god getting richer at the expense of his impoverished devotees is very common in our country. It never occurs to any devotee to ask a logical question why his god chooses to keep him in poverty while he (the god) becomes richer by the day. The Saibaba of Shirdi who wore only tattered clothes while he was alive, now owns a crown of diamonds. One thing is clear that more and more novel religious programmes and ceremonies are conducted every year creating a lot of hullabaloo in celebration of the deity providing some entertainment to the common people.

Goa is not an exception to the rest of India as far as the illegal temple building is concerned. The modus operandi of this business also is the same as elsewhere. As in other places it begins with erecting a small dome over an idol of a popular deity. No one takes any objection to the construction as the place is public. When the construction is complete the dome is opened for the public to have a glimpse of the deity inside. The opening ceremony is accompanied by a religious-cultural programme. Some great preacher is invited from Mumbai for 'Pravachan'- spiritual enlightenment of the devotees. Important people- the Sarpanch, members of the legislative assembly, ministers- attend the programme and partake of the lunch in the company of the temple builder. Next day, the news of the ceremony is flashed in bold letters on the front page, praising the host of the ceremony. The business begins to earn profit.

Devotees regularly visit the deity and leave some money at its feet. If the idol under the dome is that of Datta, the devotees of Datta throng on Thursdays; to have a Darshan of Shivashankar, his devotees queue up on Mondays. For the Ganesh idol huge crowd gathers at the dome on Mondays and Tuesdays. On the days of Vinayaki and Angaraki, to control the crowd of devotees of Lord Ganesh near the dome, police have to be called in. The same scene can be seen on Saturdays if the deity under the dome is Hanuman. In short there is no dearth of devotees of every god at least on one day of the week. There is a constant flow of cash in front of the idol under the dome. Accumulation of cash is likely to be accompanied by trouble. So in order to avoid any likely incident, the shrewd owner hires a few tough guys and secures his steadily increasing income. Soon the dome becomes a place of religious conviction and loyalty. Some over enthusiastic devotees invent primeval antiquity of the place and the idol under the dome. This belief makes the idol and the dome

immune to being removed from their position occupying public place. The owner gives a sigh of relief.

Now this 'Jagrit' deity and the dome of antiquity becomes a hindrance even if Government needs the space for any project of public interest. The government has to pay the owner of the dome a sumptuous amount as compensation. Thus this sturdy law breaker who has encroached upon a public place, in the first place, is rewarded instead of being penalized. What kind of justice is this? It thus encourages the lucrative glib business of temple building practiced by the unscrupulous vampires in the society. The small state of Goa consists of only two districts. It is not, therefore difficult to find out these unauthorized temples and prayer houses; but no attempt seems to be made in this direction and the temple building business flourishes without hindrance.

In many cities these temples are built in the vicinity of the bus depots where many passengers gather. Concrete embankments are built around the trunks of huge trees in this area and the spots are then converted into religious places of worship. Every week on the day of the deity of these places, mikes blare out devotional songs from early morning till late in the night. The mike owners have no regard for the charm and grace of the art of Music and throw all restrictions of volume to the winds. Louder volume makes better music according to them. The residents of this area are at the receiving end of this 'Tamasha'. The noise pollution is harmful to their health; students find it difficult to concentrate on their studies; and yet no steps are taken to remove the site of worship from its place. A lame excuse of respecting the religious feelings of the people is offered to defend the inaction. The real reason is to keep the vote-bank of the devotees and the support of the temple builder intact.

It is true that utilizing the ill-gotten wealth for building temples will not secure any 'Punya' for the builder nor will it absolve him of his 'Pap' (immoral deeds). But here it is necessary to impress on the authorities that it is equally true that removing the unauthorized temples from the public places that they illegally occupy is no 'Pap', no sin or crime. The Rajarshi (sage-King) Shahu Maharaj, an extraordinarily brave man was acutely aware of this fact. A number of such prayer houses were erected in a disorderly manner at all nooks and corners of roads in Kolhapur before he ascended the throne. On realizing that these illegal constructions hinder the smooth flow of traffic, he decided to raze them all to the ground. The wise king knew that the religious leaders will oppose the move. One night, he invited all the heads of these prayer houses for a meeting in his palace to discuss the issue. While the discussion was in full swing within, outside the palace, all the prayer houses were, in the quiet of the night, razed to the ground. Sadashivrao Barve, the Commissioner of Pune, during the British rule, utilized the same tactic and erased all the Dargas, Mosques and temples on the roads that obstructed the traffic. Why can't it be done in Goa? But for that to happen the idle talk of

spirituality and sins and merits ought to be stopped and priority ought to be given to public interest and public benefit. But where is the political leadership that is necessary to do this?

Translated by Ms Suman Oak



## **Business and Politics of Blind Faith**

*Ram Puniyani*

Sanal Edamaruku, a rationalist is facing the legal trap for abusing others' faith. (April 2012) At the same time in another event, Nirmal Baba, who is supposed to be having divine powers and who has been flashing his paid programs in over 40 TV channels, advising people on solving their problems with various 'divine' solutions, is facing case of fraud. Recently a local court has directed the police to register a case against him for allegedly cheating people. Both these cases coming in different religions have a deeper connection. In case of Sanal Edamaruku, he was able to show the root of the water seeping from the feet of Jesus Christ on cross in Mumbai's Irla area. This water was regarded as divine and many followers were thronging the place to have access to the divine water. Sanal showed that water was from the choked drain and getting pushed up by capillary action. Sanal is facing the wrath of section of the community for hurting their faith.

Nirmala Baba, Nirmaljit Singh Nirula, a failed Businessman had disappeared in 1970 and then later repapered claiming to have divine powers and started building up his enterprise by organizing paid TV shows in which those in the audience were initially paid to ask solutions for their problems and later people in thousands thronged, paid money to enter these TV shows, 'Nirmal Darbars' and Baba started dishing out 'solutions' while his bank accounts swelled. In few years time the 'faith-business' flourished and now Baba is a multimillionaire with good deal of property under his belt.

The large section of followers thronging for the divine water seeping from the feet of Lord Jesus, to explain the source of water came as an insult of their faith. To the multiple people seeking solutions from Nirmal Baba, it was again a matter of faith. The boundaries between faith and blind faith many a times are very blurred. As such faith and reason have been counter-posed in the society. Faith has been ruling the roost in the areas of 'unknown' and the future. It has been constructed around the supernatural powers and clergy of different religions or self made Godmen have been the custodian of faith. Many an areas which were in the domain of faith shifted to reason over a period of time like nature of earth, eclipse, diseases etc.

At the same time faith has been used or manipulated for different purposes in society, including for political ones'. Ram Temple movement is the example of such use or abuse of faith. Hiding behind Sharia to continue with certain retrograde social practices is another such example.

The natural phenomenon being interpreted through the angle of faith, Earth is flat, God created life in such and such fashion, is one thing and to create a well planned show to rouse people's faith and then to make business of it with the help of section of TV, media, unmindful of their social responsibility is another side of the same coin. One concedes that the insecurities of the society have gone up by leaps and bounds and this faith gives a emotional support to many to sustain in the midst of the hardships prevalent all around. Still we do need to bring out the boundaries where the rational thinking, the one our Constitution ordains us to promote, needs to be adhered to sincerely.

In case of Nirmal Baba state has correctly woken up and case has been put up against him. In case of Sanal state and society need to protect him from the trappings of law to uphold reason. The mechanical interpretation of laws 'hurting the faith' of others needs to be sanitized for protection of the mandate of Indian Constitution to promote rational thinking and to protect the likes of Sanal. In case of Nirmal Baba, the media, which has aired the sponsored shows of Baba and built up his fraud, needs to introspect.

The claims that these are matters related to religion are again far away from the truth and have a distorted perception of the complex phenomenon of religion. The core part of any religion is the morality developed by the prophets and society over long period of time. The institutions built around religions and the hyper-emphasis on rituals, *sharia* is an insertion by the clergy, who has its own vested interests and which has ensured the suppression of rational thought all through. One recalls the battles between Charvak and clergy related to the oldest struggle of reason to come up in social thinking and pull the society out of the clutches of the vested interests of clergy.

In Europe the scientists like Bruno, Servatus, and Galileo suffered immense torture at the hands of powerful mediators of the institutional religions. One must re-emphasize the difference between the teachings of the prophets-religions and emphasis on identity and rituals by institutions of religion and variety of Godmen. Prophets were for radical changes in the society to come out from the evils prevalent in society, they were for change and for justice. The institutions built in their name are there for status quo and for preserving the system where few benefit and most in the society suffer. The rational thinkers, scientists had to face imprisonment or other harassment for discovering things like Earth is round, diseases are not due to wrath of God etc.

The response of the clergy was a severe condemnation of this rational thinking as it would undermine their privileges in the society. While Europe has seen its battle against the blind faith, faith based knowledge; it seems at broader level that we in India are still struggling to come out from the impositions of faith. One can say that even in recent times those who stood for social change and justice like Jotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar Ramaswamy Naicker and Bhagat Singh resorted to rational thought and those for status quo of social relationships took recourse to identity of religion. Their politics took cover under the name of religion and they harped on faith and issues built around identity issues.

The continuation of the mind set of feudal society has got mixed up with the new challenges of globalization and contemporary insecurities faced by the average people. Nirmal Baba may be a crude example from the battery of these Godmen. There are others who are more sophisticated and have a vast reach through diverse mechanisms. Godmen, faith merchants are those who have en-cashed on the insecurities of people by mixing the creation of miracles with faith, mixing spirituality and faith in a variety of ways. As Meera Nanda, an eminent social scientist, in her book 'God Market' has demonstrated this phenomenon has expanded by leaps and bounds in last three decades. The proliferation of Babas of different hues all around has put a brake on the growth and promotion of rational thought and scientific temper. The patronage of high and mighty to these Godmen, or persecution of people like Sanal is a matter of deep concern and is a mirror showing us as to where our society is going in the matters of faith.

The litmus test of the values of Babas and those putting cases against the likes of Sanal has to be, how much these elements are talking of prevalent social injustices, how much they are promoting the morality inherent in their religions? On this count the God men are tongue tied. It is time we build the conduits to promote rational thinking and confronting the tricks played by the likes of Nirmal Baba and those propagating the existence of miracles out of phenomenon which can be explained by scientific inquiry.

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## The Sleep of Reason

*Babu Gogineni*



*The Human Angle*

The Spanish painter Francisco de Goya produced a series of etchings in 1797, the most famous of which he titled: *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The Sleep of Reason brings forth Monsters).

In this masterpiece of thought and technique, a writer is asleep at his desk, his head resting in his arms, while behind him are owls, bats, and a gathering storm of other creatures of the night, all menacingly swooping down on him, while a perplexed cat looks on. But, soon after this daring caution, Goya panicked and withdrew his etching, for fear of the Inquisition whose shadow hovered on Spanish society at that time.

Goya captured the mood of his age, and as Europe and America woke up to reason and science, these two continents moved on from those dark times.

Because of humanity's uneven moulting, however, the story is different elsewhere, and reasons continued and perilous repose in Africa and Asia is a cause for grave concern. These two continents make up for two thirds of the world's population, but are heavily weighed down by a magical conception of the world, and by dangerous superstitions.

A superstition is simply a wrong belief about something — like believing that seeing a widow could bring bad luck.

Untested, and unchallenged, such beliefs can have real and serious consequences; for thousands of years, in India, widows were forced to remain out of sight, and were banished to a miserable life of isolation.

Sporting 'lucky' shirts, writing exams with a 'lucky' pen etc may give a psychological boost, but the fetish can soon cross limits and transform into an obsession with lucky days, lucky dates and lucky numbers.

Changing spellings of one's name to ensure success, performing rituals for good luck, wearing coloured gem stones for success in business etc could soon become a substitute for real work.

When large groups of people perform rituals to 'promote world peace', it is a warning that the people's faith in themselves and in their ability to change their lives is declining; disastrously, it is also an abdication of personal responsibility for one's future.

In the 54 countries of Africa and in the 52 countries of Asia, it is time to wake up, and to wake reason up!

Superstition rarely confines itself to the personal sphere and is bound to impact public policy, thereby weakening the very foundations of democracy.

In the current presidential campaign in America, candidates are talking about evolution and climate change as if these were matters of belief and not facts. That is a real danger because a democracy needs reason, not ritual; informed debate, not dogma.

Where superstitions are associated with prejudice, the results are horrific: In Africa homosexuals are killed as a danger to society, albinos are hunted for body parts used in witchcraft, women are killed on suspicion of sorcery; in Asia, women are denied their most basic rights, children are sacrificed to uncover hidden treasures, and lives are ruined because of assumptions about rebirth.

Superstition is also the basis of one of the most pernicious systems of social division and discrimination in human history — the caste system — which, with its graded system of inequality and its 250 million untouchable victims in 13 countries, poses the greatest danger ever to human solidarity.

Robert Ingersoll was right when he said that superstition is the child of ignorance and the mother of misery.



Blind beliefs demean and dehumanise entire societies, and prevent us from exercising our true human and moral potential.

We know from history and human experience that reason is the antidote to the misery of superstition, and that it can also vanquish bigotry, dogma and prejudice. It also makes us reasonable and hence more peaceful.

The way to proceed on this path was spelt out in 1787 by the American statesman Jefferson, a contemporary of Goya: Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion.

This is not happening in today's India. Even in this century of space flights and satellite communications, many, including several practising scientists, hold a schizophrenic allegiance to geocentric astrology and flat earth geomancy.

Social progress means that people should align their beliefs and behaviour to new knowledge and understanding of nature and society. By this measure, we are experiencing a serious regress. It is not enough that India's Constitution enjoins all citizens in its Article 51 (a) (h) to promote the scientific temper as a Fundamental Duty.

Public officials who swear to uphold the Constitution are routinely in breach of this exhortation, space scientists perform religious rituals before launching satellites — is it science or Sanskrit that keeps a satellite in orbit?

Blind belief has so dulled our sense of reasoning that we no longer apply common sense in the conduct of our daily lives. We are becoming a laughing stock of the world.

A spirited and passionate defence of reason and the scientific method is therefore needed today in our public life.

Is it not time to stop our daily national humiliation of delusion and unpunished deception of the ignorant and the innocent? Is it not time to prove ourselves as deserving of the fruits of modern knowledge?

Is it not time to free ourselves from the tyranny of ignorance?

Teacher, Politician, Scientist, Engineer, Farmer, Student, Parent, Housewife, Citizen! Listen to MN Roy's poetic wisdom when he called Reason the rhythm of the cosmos! Heed the admonition of the

Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius who asked in *Meditations*, in AD 180: Hast thou reason? Why then dost not thou use it?

*(Babu Gogineni is an international humanist and human rights activist).*

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## The skeptic

Wendy Grossman

One of the problems with skepticism is that you're typically not in charge of your own agenda: you spend much of your time reacting to the claims other people make. This is often discussed in skeptical circles with some dismay. In this country, Richard Wiseman and Ben Goldacre have both done a good job of up-ending this situation and setting the pace for their own work.

Around the turn of the millennium, a change set in. Perhaps many others, like me, had gotten bored with continuously cycling through the same topics like a hamster trapped on a wheel: astrology, graphology, ESP, telekinesis, psychics, ghosts, UFOs, and the occasional health claim. Homeopathy came up the most often, but there were and are always plenty of quack remedies to write about.

About 1998, *The Skeptic* magazine's second editors, Steve Donnelly and Toby Howard, wanted to hand the magazine on, and I began my second stint as editor while trying to find a replacement (Chris French and a string of assistant editors took over in 2000 and continue to do a fine job). At that point it seemed to me that we couldn't go on the way we had been. Michael Shermer with his LA-based *The Skeptic* was already beginning to branch out, and it seemed clear to several of us that our *The Skeptic* needed to go the same way. We needed, we thought, to cover topics whose science was unclear, even controversial. Modern topics, like GM foods, climate change (we still called it global warming back then), the link, if any, between mobile phone use and brain cancer. Like that.

It turned out we were part of a general move throughout the skeptical world to broaden our horizons. One reason was clearly the political regime in the US in the 2000s. Before Bush II it was possible to be skeptical without being political; but contempt for science and reason was so endemic in Bush's administration that it was impossible to remain that way. This fact was, I believe, part of the reason the US-based Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (the

cleverly named CSICOP) changed its name to the Center for Scientific Inquiry; its remit had to expand to cover politics, science, and even some religious activism (particularly in the area of creationism in the schools).

The change has probably kept a lot of skeptics from burning out: the boredom of repetition really is the enemy in this particular business. For one thing, it's bad for the soul. For another, it's not a good way to advertise a habit of thinking. Plus, it's boring.

But the reason it's such a danger is that probably the most significant difference between science and pseudoscience is that pseudoscience does not advance. What is there that's new to say about astrology? As a practice it has barely changed in the last 2,000 years. Oh, sure, there are new studies once in a while. But they don't change the ball game. The discovery (and recent relegation) of Pluto made no difference to star charts. Astronomers had long predicted the existence of a planetary body in Pluto's spot because they could see the gravitational pull on the planetary orbits they were studying. Astrologers never once said, gee, there's a missing influence here that we can't see but must be present.

The same goes for homeopathy, chiropractic, creationism, or ESP: little within those belief systems has changed materially in the 23 years *The Skeptic* has been in business (see our new anthology from the first 21 of those years, *Why Statues Weep*). Even UFOs and ghosts: new cases pop up from time to time, but none ever provides conclusive evidence of anything. We never get, as I said nearly 15 years ago to John Stapleton on *The Time, The Place*, to the point where an alien spacecraft – not *unidentified* – lands on the roof of Buckingham Palace and we stop arguing about whether it's really an alien spacecraft and instead have debates about who ought to pay for the damage.

Covering controversial science is, of course, harder. For one thing, you're covering topics where you, like everyone else, genuinely don't know what conclusion scientific consensus will eventually reach or how it will be applied. Sometimes there's good and bad science on both sides, such as the debates over GM foods. In some areas, like climate change, we have the added problem that "skeptic" denotes deniers who insist it isn't happening; that's not us.

In any case, it looks as if we'll have plenty of material for the next 23 years.

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## The unpleasant truth: 90 per cent of Indians are fools

*Justice Markandey Katju, (Retd)*

Someone asked me, “Justice Katju, you say you wish to keep away from controversies, but why is it that controversies keep chasing you?” I replied that while it is true that I wish to be uncontroversial, I have a great defect: I cannot remain silent when I see my country going downhill. Even if others are deaf and dumb, I am not. So I will speak out. As Faiz said: “Bol ki lab azad hain tere/ Bol zubaan ab tak teri hai.”

In our shastras it is written: “Satyam bruyat, priyam bruyat, na bruyat satyam apriyam.” It means, “Speak the truth, speak the pleasant, but do not speak the unpleasant truth.” I wish to rectify this. The country’s situation today requires that we say “Bruyat satyam apriyam”, i.e. “Speak the unpleasant truth”.

When I said that 90 per cent Indians are fools I spoke an unpleasant truth. The truth is that the minds of 90 per cent Indians are full of casteism, communalism, superstition. Consider the following:

First, when our people go to vote in elections, 90 per cent vote on the basis of caste or community, not the merits of the candidate. That is why Phoolan Devi, a known dacoit-cum-murderer, was elected to Parliament — because she belonged to a backward caste that had a large number of voters in that constituency. Vote banks are on the basis of caste and community, which are manipulated by unscrupulous politicians and others.

Second, 90 per cent Indians believe in astrology, which is pure superstition and humbug. Even a little common sense tells us that the movements of stars and planets have nothing to do with our lives. Yet, TV channels showing astrology have high TRP ratings.

Third, cricket has been turned into a religion by our corporatised media, and most people lap it up like opium. The real problems facing 80 per cent of the people are socio-economic — poverty, unemployment, malnourishment, price rise, lack of healthcare, education, housing etc. But the media sidelines or minimises these real issues, and gives the impression that the real issues are the lives of film stars, fashion, cricket, etc. When Rahul Dravid retired, the media depicted it as a great misfortune for the country, and when Sachin Tendulkar scored his 100th century it was depicted as a great achievement for India. Day after day, the media kept harping on this, whereas the issues of a quarter of a million farmers’ suicides and 47 per cent Indian children being malnourished were sidelined.

Fourth, I had criticised the media hype around Dev Anand's death at a time when 47 farmers in India were committing suicide on an average every day for the last 15 years. A section of the media attacked me for doing so, but I reiterate that I see no justification for the high publicity given by the media to this event for several days. In my opinion, Dev Anand's films transported the minds of poor people to a world of make-believe, like a hill station where Dev Anand was romancing some girl. This gave relief for a couple of hours to the viewers from their lives of drudgery. Such films, to my mind, serve no social purpose, but act instead like a drug or alcohol to send the viewer temporarily from his miserable existence to a beautiful world of tinsel.

Finally, during the recent Anna Hazare agitation in Delhi, the media hyped the event as a solution to the problem of corruption. In reality it was, as Shakespeare said in *Macbeth*, "...a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing". (In an earlier piece in this paper, 'Recreating Frankenstein's monster', IE, March 31, I had said, "The Lokpal Bill will create a parallel bureaucracy, which will turn into Frankenstein's monster.") At that time, if anyone had raised any logical questions, he would have been denounced as a "gaddar" or "deshdrohi". The people who collected at Jantar Mantar or the Ramlila grounds displayed a mob mentality that has been accurately described by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*.

After Caesar's murder, Mark Antony stirred up the Roman mob, which went around seeking revenge on the conspirators. One of the conspirators was named Cinna. The mob caught hold of another man, also named Cinna, who protested that he was Cinna the poet and not Cinna the conspirator. Despite his protests, the mob said, "tear him for his bad verses", and lynched him.

The Jan Lokpal Bill 2011 defines an act of corruption as punishable under Chapter IX of the Indian Penal Code or under the Prevention of Corruption Act vide Section 2(e). Section 6(a) of the bill says the Lokpal will exercise superintendence over investigation of acts of corruption, and section 6(c) empowers the Lokpal to punish acts of corruption after giving a hearing. Section 6(e) authorises the Lokpal to initiate prosecution, and section 6(f) authorises him to ensure proper prosecution. Section 6(i)(j) authorises him to receive complaints.

Section 2(c) of the Prevention of Corruption Act defines a public servant very widely. It includes not only government servants but also a host of other categories, such as employees of a local body, judges, certain office-bearers of some cooperative societies, officials of Service Commission or Board, and vice chancellors and teachers in universities.

As pointed out in 'Recreating Frankenstein's monster', there are about 55 lakh government employees (13 lakh in the Railways alone). There will be several lakhs more in other categories

coming under the definition of public servant according to the Prevention of Corruption Act. Obviously, one person cannot supervise and decide on presumably millions of complaints pouring in against them. Hence, thousands of Lokpals, maybe 50,000 or more, will have to be appointed. They will have to be given salaries, offices, staff, etc. Considering the low level of morality prevailing in India, we can be fairly certain that most of them will become blackmailers. It will create a parallel bureaucracy, which in one stroke will double the corruption in the country. And who will guard these Praetorian Guards? A body of Super Lokpals?

All this was not rationally analysed. Instead, the hysterical mob that gathered in Jantar Mantar and Ramlila grounds in Delhi thought that corruption would be ended by shouting “Bharat Mata ki Jai” and “Inquilab Zindabad”.

It is time Indians woke up to all this. When I called 90 per cent of them fools my intention was not to harm them, rather it was just the contrary. I want to see Indians prosper, I want poverty and unemployment abolished, I want the standard of living of the 80 per cent poor Indians to rise so that they get decent lives.

But this is possible when their mindset changes, when their minds are rid of casteism, communalism and superstition, and they become scientific and modern.

By being modern, I do not mean wearing a nice suit or a beautiful sari or skirt. Being modern means having a modern mind, which means a rational mind, a logical mind, a questioning mind, a scientific mind. At one time, India led the world in science and technology (see my article “Sanskrit as a language of Science” on kgfindia.com). That was because our scientific ancestors, like Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, Sushruta, Charaka etc, questioned everything. However, we subsequently took the unscientific path of superstition and empty ritual, which has led us to disaster. Today we are far behind the West in science and technology.

The worst thing in life is poverty, and 80 per cent of our people are poor. To abolish poverty, we need to spread the scientific outlook to every nook and corner of our country. It is only then that India will shine. And until that happens, the vast majority of our people will continue to be taken for a ride.

*The writer, a former judge of the Supreme Court, is chairman of the Press Council.*

*Courtesy: Indian Express*



## Religion is Irrational, but so is Atheism

Jonathan Lanman

*Why are some people religious and others atheists? Do we really know what we mean by atheism? Here is a very paradoxical clue*

IN THIS space a year ago, Lois Lee and Stephen Bullivant called for a science of "non-religion". They provided evidence against the idea that more education leads to less religious belief, which they call the "Enlightenment assumption", and argued that we know little about why we have the beliefs we do.

I agree. The origins of our beliefs are more mysterious than the Enlightenment assumption holds. Besides specific studies of education and religiosity, we also have a wealth of evidence showing the impact of unconscious biases on our thinking, which demonstrate the human mind is less rational than many of us would wish. The implication is that explaining religion or atheism is less a matter of explaining what goes wrong in otherwise rational minds and more a matter of explaining how different environments affect universal cognitive mechanisms.

But what, precisely, are we to explain? I spent 2008 researching atheism in the US, UK, Denmark and online. I found a great diversity of "atheisms", from a lack of belief in God to a lack of belief in all supernatural agents to a moral opposition to all religions. So how is a science of all this to proceed? I think we need to get past the terms themselves and focus on patterns of thought and behaviour.

Two phenomena leapt out at me in 2008. The first was the large number of people lacking belief in all supernatural agents. This phenomenon is interesting both because of the universality of religious beliefs, and because of work by cognitive scientists of religion such as Pascal Boyer at Washington University, St Louis, and Jesse Bering at Queen's University, Belfast in the UK. This suggests such beliefs are well-supported by pan-human cognitive mechanisms. These mechanisms range from our tendency to detect agency in our environment to an unconscious assumption that we are always being watched by some supernatural agency.

The second phenomenon was moral opposition to religious beliefs and values. For many, religions are not just factually wrong but morally harmful and to be opposed. This phenomenon is interesting not only because of current controversies concerning religion and public life but because it raises fascinating questions about how moral judgements arise from both pan-human intuitions and particular socio-cultural environments. I have my own terms for these distinct phenomena: I call the lack of belief in the existence of supernatural agents "non-theism" and the moral opposition to

religious beliefs and values "strong atheism". The majority of Danes are non-theistic; few are strong atheists.

While distinguishing between the two is important, it is only a first step towards explaining these patterns of thought and behaviour. The next step is to notice patterns in their distribution. Not only do we find more non-theism and strong atheism in some places, but we even find, at least in the west, that they are negatively correlated. Denmark and Sweden, for instance, have the highest proportion of non-theists but very little strong atheist sentiment or activity. The US, however, has a very low proportion of non-theists but significant levels of strong atheism.

Why? In a word: threat. That is, I believe the distributions we see in levels of non-theism and strong atheism can be explained by the effects of threatening stimuli. Let's take non-theism first. We have compelling evidence from Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in *Sacred and Secular* that nations with high existential security, that is the perception that one's life, well-being and society are secure, exhibit less religious belief and behaviour. But we also have good reasons to doubt the common explanation of this pattern, that religion provides comfort and becomes more convincing in trying times.

Anthropologically, societies in existentially insecure environments actually believe in very non-comforting supernatural agents. In contrast, the most comforting religious ideas, such as New Age spirituality or hell-less Christianity, flourish in the affluent west. Psychologically, we have little to no evidence that our minds will believe in something just because it would be comforting to do so.

So how do we explain the link between existential security and non-theism? Rather than a "comfort" theory, evidence supports a "threat and action" theory. We have an abundance of evidence from psychology and anthropology that feeling under threat increases commitment to in-group ideologies, whether they are religious ideologies or not.

Threats also increase the motivation to participate in religious communities to obtain material benefits. For example, in many contexts, religions are the only game in town for social insurance. Finally, we have evidence that from prayer to psalm recitation, threats increase superstitious behaviour. Increased commitment, participation and superstitious behaviour are all actions, not just words, that testify to religious beliefs.

How important are such actions in producing theism? Crucial. Work by Joseph Henrich from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, myself, and others suggests that humans believe the statements of others to the extent that they back those statements with actions. That is,



rather than believing everything authority figures say, we believe to the extent that they "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk". The implication is that if parents and others believe in supernatural agents but do not show these beliefs through attendance, self-sacrifice, rule obedience and/or emotional displays, they will find their children sceptical of these beliefs and their society less theistic.

This is what happened in Scandinavia in the 20th century as governments instituted extensive welfare policies for ethnically homogenous populations. Fewer economic and social threats meant less religious action and, in the span of a generation, levels of theism fell. The US, on the other hand, instituted comparatively weak social welfare policies for a more divided population. Consequently, it saw little decline in theism.

But what of strong atheism? Counter-intuitively, while I think that a lack of social and economic threat produces non-theism, I believe that higher levels of threat to a particular vision of society help produce strong atheism. Strong atheism is not the absence of an in-group ideology but the defence of one: modern secularism.

Many scholars, including philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, have documented the emergence of a new vision of western societies in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the growth of modern nation states. Societies were no longer seen by most of their citizens as kingdoms under God but as societies of mutual benefit in which citizens use their rational minds to cooperate and improve their lives. When religions stood in the way of this by denying individual liberty and pleasure and by asserting that the purpose of life should be transcendent rather than earthly well-being, religions themselves became anti-social and even immoral.

We can partially explain strong atheist sentiment and activity as the result of religious threats to this secular vision of society. Supporting evidence is chronological and geographical. Chronologically, we find Sam Harris writing *The End of Faith* as a response to 9/11; strong atheists in the US picking up Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and joining atheist groups after the re-election of George W. Bush; and many Danes joining the Danish Atheist Society after the Muhammad cartoon controversy.

Geographical evidence can be seen in the contrast between the US and Denmark. In the US, where many Christian conservatives make no secret of their desire to govern by "Biblical" principles, we find hundreds of atheist organisations and thousands of people expressing the view that religion is immoral and to be combated through argument. In Denmark and Sweden, with little threat of politicians governing by religious principles, we find fewer atheist organisations and, in organisations that do exist, much less activity.

My account is based on both qualitative and quantitative evidence, but it requires further research. An overall point can be made, however. Our beliefs, behaviours and moral sentiments are not simply the result of dispassionate reason. As psychologists and anthropologists have argued for some time, to understand them involves considering something we might call "human nature" as well as the particular socio-cultural contexts in which people live. This is as true for explaining atheism as it is for religion.

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### **A prayer for drunken rider and Shrine for his bike**

*Apurva*

At any time of the day, there is a traffic jam on the road to Pali from Jodhpur in Rajasthan, near Chotila village. For here is Om Bana sthan, a shrine where everybody—cabbies, bus and truck drivers and those riding two-wheelers, in particular—stops and pays obeisance, usually with liquor. The deity here, known as motorcycle devta or Bullet baba, is a Royal Enfield 350, on which villager Om Bana met with a fatal accident two decades ago at this very spot. Following a series of supposedly paranormal events after Bana's death, the locals planted the motorcycle at the scene of the accident and deified Bana.

Bagga Ram, one of the deity's first followers, has played the harmonium at the shrine ever since it was built. "Om Banaji was the son of a village leader. Twenty years ago, he was riding down this road when his vehicle slammed into a tree and fell into a ditch. Banaji was killed on the spot," Ram recalls in between singing paeans to Om Bana, now also available on CDs in shops surrounding the shrine. The series of events after the accident secured Bana's ascension to the realm of gods.

Following the death of Bana, formerly known as Om Singh Rathore, the police registered a case and hauled the ravaged motorcycle to a police station nearby.

Om Singh, a police constable in Jodhpur, remembers what happened in the days following Rathore's death. "The motorcycle was taken to the station that night, but the next morning, it was found at the accident spot. The police thought it was some kind of prank and after emptying the fuel tank secured the bike with chains, but the next day, the chains were broken and the motorcycle was again at the spot of the accident," says Singh, who uses a key chain with Om Bana's picture on it.

When tales of the motorcycle's ghostly runs spread, the locals decided to station the motorcycle at the accident spot. Mahender Singh, a travel agent from Jodhpur who begins every trip with a salute to Bana, says, "Back then, only a few people would visit the temple. After tales of Om Bana riding his motorcycle on this road began to spread, his followers increased in number." He recounts the story of one of his drivers whose vehicle skidded and fell into a ditch not far from the spot of Bana's accident. "The driver was injured and bleeding in the vehicle when he swore that Om Bana came to him and helped him out. Such stories only increased this temple's reputation," Mahender Singh adds.

By the wayside on NH-65, 50 km from Jodhpur, the shrine, by itself, is isolated, with little or no habitation for 10 km on either side. It has been built on the ditch—filled up by the locals—into which Bana fell. A raised concrete dais has been built for Bana's motorcycle, planted just a few metres behind the accident-causing tree. It serves as an altar for devotees and is crowded with miniature-to-life-size photographs of Om Bana. Though the cause of his death the tree itself remains ornamented with offerings of bangles, scarves and rope. The temple even has its own priest, Poonam Giri, who has been in charge of the upkeep of the shrine for two decades.

"There is a steady flow of visitors here. Every single trucker, bus driver and cab driver stops at this spot to offer a small prayer. The shrine has grown these last few years since tourists started visiting the place as well," Giri says, adding that the morning and evening rituals at the temple include the beating of a set of traditional drums, Bagga Ram's chants and darshan.

The busy Pali-Jodhpur highway ensures a constant flow of pilgrims, who are easy enough to spot, with their bottles of liquor. Som Singh, who organises pan-Rajasthan travels from Jodhpur, says, "I come here every week to offer prayers to Om Bana. Most devotees offer liquor." He walks the traditional three circles around the motorcycle, each time pouring some of the contents of a liquor bottle onto its wheels.

A mini-economy has sprouted around the shrine. Over the last few years, at least a dozen shops have come up around its premises, selling everything from religious offerings like flowers, incense sticks, kumkum, turmeric and camphor to memorabilia including VCDs, audio tapes, key chains, necklaces, charms, rings and of course, photographs of Om Bana in all sizes.

Kailash Rathore opened his shop five years ago. "Business here is very good. I operate this shop in shifts and we are open 24 hours a day," he says, "There are many babas nowadays, but there will only be one motorcycle baba," Rathore adds, smiling.

## Haj Subsidy: Why So Much Ruckus?

*Prof. Maheboob Sayyad*

In the verdict of May 8, the Supreme Court had directed the government to taper off and eventually stop Haj subsidy given to Muslim pilgrims. In fact for all practical purposes, no subsidy had been given to pilgrims at all. In this regard, one should remember that way back in 1990s Government closed down sea route and a strong rumor was spread about Haj subsidy since then. As such a bench of justices Aftab Alam and Ranjana Prakash Desai had quoted Quran to justify doing away with the subsidy, which was around Rs 685 crores in 2011, noting that many Muslims would not be very “comfortable” to know that their Haj is funded to a large extent by the government and as such had directed to phase out Haj subsidy within a period of 10 years. In the same judgment honorable judges directed the Govt to reduce the number of members of Haj Committee from 10-12 to 2. As a matter of fact, the judgement fulfills the aspirations of constitution to have a secular state is very important and highly praiseworthy. The Supreme Court must be congratulated for making a rational judgment on the issue of subsidy for Haj travel.

The elite of the society generally tries to divide the working class on the basis of caste and religion so that this oppressed class will not revolt against them. As a part of this strategy, party like Congress spreads the rumor that they are the real protectors of minority community like Muslims and because of Party's efforts, the Muslim community is safe in this country. In addition, the Muslim fundamentalists use the slogan *Islam is in danger* to seek sympathy of Muslim community. In fact, none of them has any sympathy or compassionate feelings for poor in the community.

Instead of solving the problems about minority welfare, and providing them with proper education and health care, BJP and Shiv Sena like political and social parties hold responsible the Congress party for its preferential treatment towards Muslims. Neither of the parties has any empathy towards Muslim community. One thing is amply clear that under this pretext every one of them had fulfilled their vested interest. The statement of Congress party, "we subsidize the Haj travel expenses" and the statements made by BJP – Sena combine, "undue favoritism is bestowed upon the Muslim community," both appear to be statements made in empty air. No subsidy had been given to and no favoritism has been shown to Muslims. This is just a gossip spread all over the country by Saffron Brigade. Instead of targeting the real issues of this community, the ruling elite party is satisfied by taking the pseudo issues. Haj subsidy may top the list of such pseudo issues.

Till early 1990s, Haj pilgrims had a choice whether to travel by ship or by air. Travel by ship was less costly compared to travel by air. Those who can afford use to travel by air to save the time and hardship of sea journey and majority of travelers resort to travel by ship. There used to be three ships earmarked for Haj travel during those days. However during 1990-91, PV Narasinh Rao's Govt adopted new economic policy under the pressure from IMF, World Bank and other multinational giants to please these agencies. This had an effect on Haj travel too. Govt started phasing out the sea travel and also scrapped the ship building sector. US pressurized the Indian Govt to purchase giant aircraft manufactured by Boeing and Air Bus to benefit the parent aero industries in US and Europe. There was no other means of travel to Haj except by costliest air travel.

There was hue and cry by Haj pilgrims of rising cost of the air travel. To pacify the dissatisfied Haj pilgrims, Govt agreed to pay the difference in fares by ship and air. In this way, the term Haj subsidy came into existence. In fact if the facilities of ship travel would no have been withdrawn, most of the pilgrims who would like to save the money would have traveled by ship and those who can afford would have traveled by air. This would have certainly saved the Govt burden of paying the difference. However to please the US capitalists, Govt of India has to resort to such a cumbersome methodology.

In this policy making decision process nowhere Muslims appeared on the scene. The demands of the Haj pilgrims were genuine and just. That may be the reason why the subsequent governments, including BJP combine NDA, did not scrap or interfere with Haj subsidy. Unless one understands the complete background, there is no point in crying wolf. The memory of the public is too short. That is why such a is raised over the SC judgment.

The new liberalization policy gave birth to a large number of malpractices. Haj subsidy is also one of them. For example, Govt conveyed SC that in 2011 Govt had spent Rs 685 crores on Haj subsidy. But when the information was sought under RTI, the subsidy amount quoted was Rs 605 crores. Why there is a difference of 80 crores? From this anomaly, it appears that the difference must be much more than the quoted figures. The Govt quotes that during 2011, 124092 pilgrims visited Haj after the approval of Haj Committee, the Govt body which approves the subsidy. It also quotes the subsidy amount given to each pilgrim is to the tune of Rs 38800. The simple calculations shows,  $124092 \times 38800 = 4814769600 \approx 482$  crores. But Govt quotes 685 crores. There is a difference of 203 crores for just one year. Besides, there is no mention under which clause this subsidy amount was decided. There appears to be no logic in the figures quoted by the Govt. For example, in the year 2008, the subsidy amount was Rs 60640, almost the double amount given during 2011. From this we can safely infer that the politician and administration nexus had gulped thousands and thousand

crores. But the blame is conveniently passed on to Muslim community quietly. Haj pilgrims were never benefited by this subsidy. As such this subsidy should be stopped immediately without waiting for next 5-10 years to scrap the same.

Generally the air ticket fare to Haj travel is around 15 -17 thousands. But during the season, these fares are hiked to 55 - 60 thousands. The Air India, the airline managed by Govt of India has monopoly over the air travel of Haj pilgrims. Whatever may be the hike in fare for Haj pilgrims; all the money goes back to Govt treasury only. When one travels in the groups or books the tickets quite in advance many airlines give huge discounts in fares. But Air India refuses to give any concessions to Haj pilgrims. Instead it overcharges many a times. Govt should invite tenders from competing airline companies, so that Haj pilgrims will be benefited immensely.

In this regard we may think about travel by train to Mecca and Madina as an alternate mode of travel. The train travel will be much cheaper compared to air travel. The countries like India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, China and Iran have their own rail network reaching up to their borders. If only it is possible to connect all these networks, the rail travel to Haj pilgrims will be in reality. The pilgrims can travel by paying very less fare. But this is not going to happen as long as India acts like 51st state of US of America. In the past, Iran, Pakistan and India signed a pact to allow construction of gas pipe line directly linking Iran and India. But this project is already facing the troubles. The same fate will be met for Haj pilgrimage by rail. Unless there is pressure from public, the Govt will never act.

The political games played and the corruption aspects behind the Haj subsidy should be stopped with immediate effect. On one side Govt shows inability to undertake development due to paucity of funds and on the other side, we read the stories of scams after scams where thousands of crores are pocketed by way of corruption. Instead by doling out the money as Haj subsidy, the same can be spent on education and health care of this minority community. Govt should contemplate implementing the suggestions made by Rajendra Sachar Committee and Rangnath Mishra Commission in this regard.

●

## **Rs 10 Lakhs Pay: Corporates' Envy, Pujaris' Pride**

*Paras K Jha*

To be a priest seems more lucrative an offer than working in an MNC with an MBA from some prestigious B-school!

Finding it hard to believe? Well, you will soon see reason when you learn what the priests at Shree Dwarkadhish Temple, also known as Trilokya Sunder Jagat Mandir at Dwarka, earn for their service. The state government has paid Rs10,89,32,336 (more than Rs10.89 crore) in the last three years to the priests of the temple as their share from the temple's income.

This was disclosed by the state pilgrimage development minister Jay Narayan Vyas while replying to an un-starred question asked by Congress MLA Raghavji Patel. Interestingly, the temple committee manages the administration of the temple from the 17% share of the total income of the temple while the rest, i.e., 83% goes to priests' families.

"We have been given the right of serving Thakorji (Lord Krishna's pooja) since 1934 by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Vadodara. During that period, Dwarka region fell under his kingdom. The constitution of the temple had been finalised in 1934 and since then the district collector is the president of the temple committee.

Earlier priests' share was 94% of the temple income, which has, however, been reduced to 83% now," said Dipak Thaker, who is a 10th generation member of three main priests who were given the rights of service to the temple.

From the three brothers — Ramji, Mohanji and Damji Thaker — who served as main priests, there are 36 priests in their lineage today. The earnings are shared among all the 36 priests. So, in last three years, every priest pocketed Rs30.25 lakh, which comes down to over Rs10 lakh annually for each of them.

However, Thaker has a different take on the issue. Listing out the responsibilities of priests, he said that they don't get more than 10% of the total income and as a matter of fact, family members of many of the priests eke out a living from other businesses or jobs.

"Though we get 83 % share in the temple's income, the priest has to bear all the expenses made within the temple complex.

Expense per day for all these rituals and services is more than Rs10,000,” said Thaker. Downplaying the earnings, he added: “As per the members of the lineages of those three main priests, there are turns where some priests are getting chance of service for 60 days in a year, whereas some only get only one day. Therefore, income is not that much impressive for all these priests.”

*Courtesy: DNA*

**Lokayata:  
The spark of rationalism and scientific temper  
in ancient India**

*Anand Nair*

In ancient India, there were broadly three schools of philosophical thought -- Vedanta, Sankhya and Lokayata. Vedanta is theistic & spiritual, Sankhya and Lokayata are atheistic & materialistic.

What little we know today about the latter two schools are mostly from derogatory and dismissive references to these in the Vedanta literature.

The essence of Vedanta philosophy is that all human beings (animals and inanimate things too?) have souls (Atman). And although physically all beings have a separate existence, their souls are actually not separate. They are merged into one supreme soul (Param-atmah) or the absolute soul (Brahman). This unity of different souls is called Advaita or non-dualism (also called Monism). The doctrine of Advaita is central to Vedanta philosophy. The visible and palpable universe around us is considered to be unreal (Mithya) which is but an illusion (i.e. Maya), while that which is the supreme reality, the absolute soul (Brahman), cannot be perceived by our normal senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch or taste.

The above are dogmatic (and allegedly "sanatana" or eternally valid) statements about the nature of the universe. None of these are falsifiable (through future evidence or possible observation), and hence I would think of these to be of no practical significance in furthering our understanding the universe. Not so in a way that can be of any practical use...

Vedanta as a philosophy, is authoritarian. Vedanta premises that its own dogmas about nature are "sanatana", and not subject to revision by later observation through our senses. (When was Vedantic "knowledge" last revised?). Insights of Vedanta were allegedly acquired by its authors as part of "revelation" or through "dhyana" (inner contemplation). Those who have not had this personal spiritual experience (revelation of the sanatana truths) are expected to accept the dogmas about nature on faith.



According to Sankhya (Numbers) school, everything begins with matter (Prakriti -- female); but this matter in itself is inert or dead, it is activated by the stimulus provided to it by the motive power (Purusha -- male) and the result of this is the active universe with its twinkling stars and rotating planets of which we, with life and consciousness, are a part. The Sankhya system of ideas assumes the existence of both matter (Prakriti) and motive power (Purusha) to begin with. The universe is not looked upon as the creation of a supreme creator.

Despite the above element of "atheism", the Sankhya doctrine is not entirely materialistic. According to Sankhya, matter (Prakriti) exists without any creator having created it, but is inert until it is activated by the motive power (Purusha). Sankhya would thus seem to be a dualistic philosophy -- which is understandable as this preceded the information about "life" and its origins (that we now have) by several thousand years.

The Sankhya doctrine was not incorporated into religion (Brahmanism). It never obtained wide acceptability among Hindu philosophers as did Vedanta. Lokayata, unlike Vedanta and Sankhya, tried to explain the nature of the universe without the intervention of either God, spirit or devil. "Truth", for Lokayata Philosophers, consisted only of that which could be perceived by human senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch. Nothing was accepted as a matter of faith, and the quest to know more about the unknown was the driving force of this school.

According to the (then conclusions of) Lokayata school, the universe was made up of physical forces which activated and stimulated each other. These physical forces, although active, did not move about consciously towards any set purpose. The exponents of Lokayata did not believe in concepts such as life after death or rebirth. A charge that was made against adherents of this philosophy was that they emphasized only the material aspects while disregarding spiritual ones. But this was natural in a school which looked upon only the perceptible as real.

The Lokayata philosophy, which seems closest to the modern science or rationalism, seems to have been popular at some stage of history in ancient India. The term Lokayata itself can be translated as "widespread among the people". Its main exponent is considered to be a philosopher named Charavaka who is said to be a contemporary of Sri Krishna and if legend is to be believed, he was burnt at the orders of Yudhishthira after the Mahabharata war. His crime was apostasy in declaring that the Vedas are not the ultimate in human knowledge.

The "deep investment" made by Vedanta in promoting patriarchy is by way of the "chatur-varna" concept. Unfortunately, this got to be used to justify (as part of monistic "nature") a hierarchical social order -- including the rightful place for the woman who has no caste. This is not a Brahminical interpolation on to the philosophy. This "natural social inequality" is an intrinsic part of Vedanta

monistic philosophy of Karma & Rebirth. Buddha had rebelled against just this feature of the Vedanta philosophy.

It would seem that modern science has managed to truly internalise the "courageous spirit of enquiry" as no other school of thought ever succeeded in the past. (Attempts by those like Charavaka of the Lokayata schools in India were quickly smothered -- literally burnt --by the powerful and authoritarian Vedanta school)

In more recent times, Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddha philosophy is interesting. In his opus, "Buddha and His Dhamma" he sees the Buddha as having promoted the scientific and rational spirit -- in the same sense of the terms as emerged much later in Europe, during the period of Enlightenment.

Enlightenment in Europe saw the relegation of the role of religion from philosophy, public affairs, education etc., to something purely personal. Religion's ability to provide explanations regarding the nature of the universe was totally discounted as a result of social changes during Enlightenment. And by religion, it was not merely "Abrahamic religions", but also the "pagan" systems of thought that existed in Europe prior to the spread of Christianity and Islam. Enlightenment in Europe was not a rejection of this or that religion -- rather it was the positive emergence of an entirely novel "materialistic" method of investigating and understanding the universe.

According to Ambedkar, the Buddha (like those who led Enlightenment in Europe, much later) had rejected the earlier modes of thought that were prevalent at his time. He held that people must continuously update knowledge and philosophy based on information as available -- and not look upon ancient texts or passed-on-philosophies as repositories of "sanatana" (eternal) wisdom. Ambedkar disregarded Buddha's own views on rebirth etc., as these were based on limited information available at the time when these concepts were conceived. Ambedkar claims that had the Buddha been around today, he would have rejected some of his own earlier views (as Newton too would have) and whole heartedly accepted the methods and findings of modern science. He would definitely have abandoned specific parts of his own perceptions that have lost validity based on increased information that is available in the 21st century. It is ironic that Ambedkar's "dhamma" has now become a "sacred book" for the dalit converttees to his "religion". (They take their marriage vows over this book!).

It is in the above context that we need to appreciate the intellect and foresight of the Lokayata thinkers of ancient India...

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# THOUGHT & ACTION

Committed to Build



Rationalist Society

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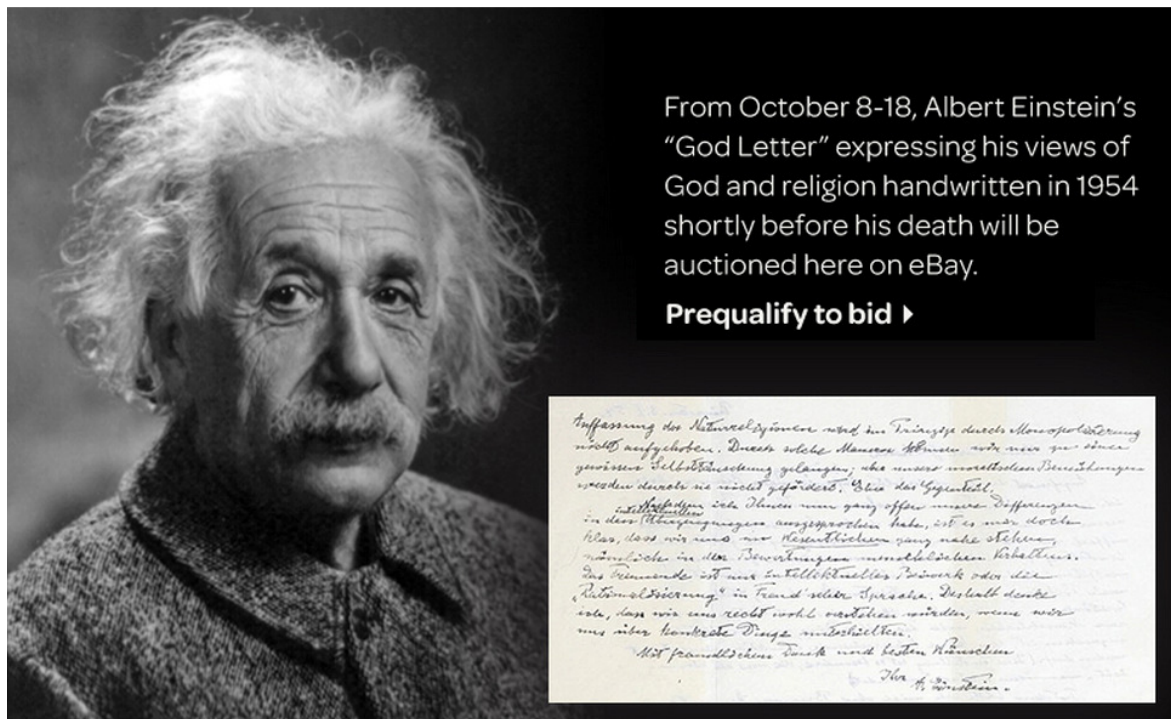
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## Albert Einstein's Historic 1954 "God Letter"

*Religious apologists cannot entirely be blamed for claiming Albert Einstein as one of their own. He was fond of quoting "God" as a poetic metaphor, in rather irresponsible fashion although, to be fair in turn to Einstein, he couldn't have anticipated the extent of today's dishonest quote-mining. So it is good to see this letter, written shortly before his death, which should lay to rest, once and for all, the eager myth that Einstein believed in God. Along with various other sources, this letter finally confirms that Einstein was, in every realistic sense of the word, an atheist. When the letter came up for auction in London, in 2008, I made a futile attempt to buy it as a gift for the Richard Dawkins Foundation. I could offer only a small fraction of the eventual price, and even that was far less than the \$3M now being asked as a minimum. I hope that whoever wins this auction will display it prominently, complete with translations into English and other languages.*



This private letter expresses views never meant for public consumption by of one of the most prolific minds of modern times on the subjects of God, religion and tribalism.

Few people have had access to the thoughts and uncensored opinions of this brilliant mind as it relates to his personal views on God and religion. The personal nature of the letter and the timing of it in Albert Einstein's life adds to the implication of the certainty with which he wrote it. The sureness of his script and the methodical nature with which he chose his words lend to the documents weight. The ideas expressed are the culmination of a lifetime of work exploring the most principle questions of existence. If there were a guide for seekers of answers, this letter would be the introduction.

The auction is for the original, handwritten, in German, letter and envelope, sent on Princeton University letterhead, to Eric B. Gutkind, on January 3, 1954, a year before Einstein passed away, sent as response to Gutkind's book "Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt".

Key Passages:

*... I read a great deal in the last days of your book, and thank you very much for sending it to me. What especially struck me about it was this. With regard to the factual attitude to life and to the human community we have a great deal in common.*

*... The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this. These subtilised interpretations are highly manifold according to their nature and have almost nothing to do with the original text. For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. And the Jewish people to whom I gladly belong and with whose mentality I have a deep affinity have no different quality for me than all other people. As far as my experience goes, they are also no better than other human groups, although they are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power. Otherwise I cannot see anything 'chosen' about them.*

*In general I find it painful that you claim a privileged position and try to defend it by two walls of pride, an external one as a man and an internal one as a Jew. As a man you claim, so to speak, a dispensation from causality otherwise accepted, as a Jew the privilege of monotheism. But a limited causality is no longer a causality at all, as our wonderful Spinoza recognized with all*

*incision, probably as the first one. And the animistic interpretations of the religions of nature are in principle not annulled by monopolization. With such walls we can only attain a certain self-deception, but our moral efforts are not furthered by them. On the contrary.*

*Now that I have quite openly stated our differences in intellectual convictions it is still clear to me that we are quite close to each other in essential things, i.e; in our evaluations of human behavior. What separates us are only intellectual 'props' and 'rationalization' in Freud's language. Therefore I think that we would understand each other quite well if we talked about concrete things.*

*With friendly thanks and best wishes,*

*Yours,*

*A. Einstein*

The translation above is an abridgment of the letter from Albert Einstein to Eric Gutkind from Princeton in January 1954, translated from German by Joan Stambaugh.

Since its purchase, the letter has been stored at a professional academic institution which specializes in the care of cultural heritage collections. The item is stored in a temperature, humidity and light controlled environment. The authenticity of the letter has never been questioned, as it has been well known in the scientific community for over 50 years. This is further enhanced by the original envelope, stamp, and postmark. The auction will commence at the opening bid of \$3 million US dollars.

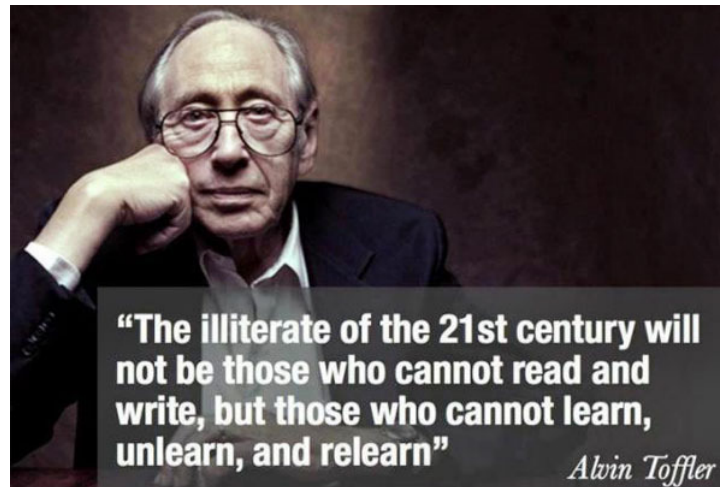
*Courtesy: **ebay***



## **Believe It or Not**

*P K Surendran*

I have often wondered if it's a believer or an atheist who is better for Earth. And, with the amassed wisdom of several decades, I now declare it is, of course, the non believer — be it an agonistic or an atheist. Because at least he will not come after you with a hatchet like the believer does.



Therefore, I watch with alarm that atheism or non-belief has been declining in the developing countries, mainly because of the fall of communism. Conversely, unbelief has been growing in the First World but, but not enough to counter the rapid growth of believers in the countries that we call the Third World. Since the '60s atheists have been declining in world population. A study by Britannica says atheists are now 2.4 per cent of the global populace. It was some 10 per cent in the '50s. Agnostics (who believe the world is beyond the limited sensory realm of man but believes there's a spirit) and those who are indifferent to religion are also somewhat on the decline. They are now 11.5 per cent from 20 per cent.

What does it mean?

For South Asia it means a lot. Believers tend to fall prey to religious bigotry which we see today in Pakistan and many other Islamic countries. Believers also are easily bamboozled by a wily priesthood. In India much of the social discrimination and community crimes are associated with religious beliefs (like Sati) and are justified by the priesthood.

While, not surprisingly, India does not have data of believers and non-believers (it never had data on anything, anyway), it is believed by Rationalists Associations that the country has less than two per cent population who publicly admit to be non-believers. Many atheists are coy, too. For instance, AK Antony is an atheist but he would never admit it in public for fear of reprisals from the majority — the believers. Atheist Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru could do little for India while he infused a bit of enthusiasm for 'scientific temper' in social life. But the Communists had this advantage of professing atheism publicly but now they are so compelled

to allow believers a big say just for the vote bank. For example, in Kerala, which gave Communists the first toe-hold in free India, the Communists changed their tactics four decades ago asking the cadres to intrude into temple management so that they could hold a sway over them. But their strategy worked only with Hindu temples.

**West grows opposite!**

A pleasant surprise is in the developed West. The number of atheists is rising, though not phenomenally. The First World will probably become a larger part of the world's total population, so atheism may be headed towards a long term recovery. Greg Paul, an independent researcher, wrote in the Washington Post last September: "The future of American faith is grim as the nation undergoes the secularization process that has already pretty much wrecked the churches in the rest of the West. So what will happen to American society as it too becomes as non-theistic as, say, Canada? My next essay will show how the loss of religion is not the big social/moral deal many make it out to be."

**Discrimination against atheists**

According to a 2005 Eurostat Eurobarometer poll, France topped the list of atheists with 30 per cent, followed by Czech and Belgium with 33 and 27 per cent respectively. Several studies proved Sweden to be the most atheist nation in the world (agnostics included). Leaders say secularism flourishes when people become non-believers. Which in other word translates into this: a non-believer tends to be more humane than the religious, whether you like it or not.

**Tailand**

"I do not understand how any woman on the face of the planet can call herself religious with the knowledge that these atrocities are being committed to women in the name of religion," Kelly Quantrill, an astronomy enthusiast of South America, wrote in her blog, Waxing Apocalyptic. She wants all women to be either agnostics or atheists. You say man will subdue you? Well, how and for how long. Nature has chosen female over male for survival of the species, doesn't it? Man is dispensable syringe but woman is essential drug, got it?

*Courtesy: **Postnoon***





## Can Sita be the Role Model for Contemporary Women?

*Ram Puniyani*

Women's struggle to break the shackles of patriarchy and come of their own is a part of democratization/secularization process of society. In India while this equality has been granted right with the implementation of Constitution in free India, the social realities are far from those of equality. With the rise of cultural, religious and social norms, which accompany politics in the name of religion, the matters are worse off as far as struggle for gender justice is concerned. While women's movement has been asserting the longing for equality, this process has got several obstacles and these obstacles, when couched in the language of religion become much more difficult to overcome.

The observation of Bombay High Court (March 2012) that married women should be like Goddess Sita and should give up their all to accompany their husband like Sita did, is what is desirable. The learned judges were opining on a case of divorce in which woman is not willing to join her husband, who has got a job in Port Blair and she is living in Mumbai. The judge's observation and taking a cue from the mythological figures itself has lot of problems. On the top of that the analogy of Sita may be most painful as far as women are concerned. Despite various versions of Lord Ram story prevailing around the most common and well known in this part of the country is the one of Valmiki. This Valmiki version has been made more popular by Mahrshi Ramanand Sagar through his serial Ramayan. Here the character of Sita is most servile and subservient to the Lord. For example when Ram faces the dilemma of banishing her to forest on the alleged rumors of Sita's chastity, Sita in Ramanand Sagar's version herself prods her husband to send her to forest, quite a retrograde fall over the version of Valmiki himself.

As such in most versions of Lord Ram Story what is common is that Sita is an abandoned child found by Raja (King) Janak while doing the ritual and ploughed the field. She is married off to Ram, who is exiled by his father Dashrath to keep the promise to one of his queens, Kaikeyi. From here the misery of Sita starts. Ravan, who wants to take revenge of insult of his sister Surpnakha at the hands of Ram- Laxman duo, abducts Sita and takes her to Lanka, where she is made to live in Ashok Vatika. Ravan, himself shows a desire for her but she refuses. Her

rescue is also full of insult for her. Lord Ram tells her that he has rescued her to save his own honor! Sita is made to give 'Trail by Fire', agnipariksha to prove her chastity. She passes the test and is brought back to Ayodhya to be coroneted along with her husband.

The misery intensifies. There is a rumor questioning the chastity of the queen. The King, Lord Ram, is witness to the agnipariksha. At this point instead of protecting his wife, who is pregnant, he asks his loyal brother Laxman to dump her in a forest. Exiling a pregnant wife can not by any standard be part of the justice at any time in the history. Years later when Ram meets Sita by coincidence, Ram hesitates to take her back and at this point Sita commits suicide. Probably amongst all the mythological figures, Sita's is the most tragic tale.

While all this is part of the popular folklore, how come the learned judges give the advice to any married woman to emulate Sita? No woman can have a life worse than this. The other point is in the present society trying to march towards democratic values; can we think of giving the examples from mythology to be emulated today? The period of society depicted in mythologies is the one which was having values of kingdoms. Kingdoms had the values of 'birth based hierarchy' of caste and gender. While the claims are that in ancient India, women had a glorious and respectable life, the truth comes out from the values given in the Manusmriti, a book where the women has the status totally subservient and secondary to man. It was precisely because of the caste and gender hierarchy of this 'holy' book, that Dr. Ambedkar burnt it.

With women's movement coming up and gender subservience being questioned, surely our laws and courts have to be sensitive to the aspirations of women. The very concept of woman losing her basic identity after marriage has to be consigned to the dustbin of history. The adjustment between couples has to be more innovative, few examples of which one sees in the contemporary times more so in western countries and in good measure around here as well. Here in India also there are couples who chart their own course for togetherness, without losing their basic identities and choices. We need to bring our thinking in tune with the times, the democratic set up, away from the birth based hierarchies towards the concept of equality. The intrusion of feudal and other primordial values has been wearing the garb of fundamentalism, in various religions. Christian Fundamentalism, Islamic Fundamentalism and

Hindutva are examples where the subordination of women is legitimized in the language of religion.

In India with the rise of religion based politics with Ram Temple movement, there has also been a religio-cultural accompaniment in the form of Godmen, modern Gurus, who are talking of status quo of social relationships in a refined language. Manu Smriti's values are being dished out in the clever disguise by the five star Gurus, with massive following. Many a television serials are also playing a very retrograde role as far as the norms of gender equality are concerned. The TV-Baba combination is very lethal for values desirable in a democratic set up, in a set up where we create social situations to dump patriarchal norms for good.

The analogy of Sita in particular is very painful but as such any analogy from mythological and periods of history before the democratic culture starts coming in has to be shunned. One hope courts and legal structures think of the fate of Sita before ordaining such a life for women in current times



### **A Car that Runs on Water?**

In recent days, talk show hosts who really should know better have been touting a peculiar invention known as the water kit. An engineer has claimed to have found a way to use water as a fuel that can run cars. He claims to have done this by splitting the oxygen and hydrogen molecules in water, a feat which, if real, would represent one of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of science. However, we must not forget that water is not a fuel and the fact that the matter is being debated and hyped up without proper scientific investigation, displays our profound scientific illiteracy and the media's irresponsible response to this claim.

Belief in the ability to run vehicles on water seems to now have become a matter of national pride. Nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, whose hyper patriotism seems to have swallowed the scientific nous he possesses, has treated the 'discovery' as if it was real without examining it scientifically. The cabinet, perhaps, in a burst of excitement at the prospect of our energy woes being solved, wants a demonstration of the water kit. A lone scientist or two have

been trying to inject sanity into the debate but have been shouted down by others who see a genuine scientific breakthrough where none may exist. We have often been accused by our detractors as a people ruled by emotion rather than reason. By being gullible enough to believe that we can use water as a fuel, we are doing our best to live up to the caricature.



The problem here is that we are so insecure about our achievements on the world stage that when one of our own claims to have done something incredible, our first instinct is to believe him, defend him against all criticism and see the person as improving the image of the country. Naysayers are instantly denounced as self-loathing individuals. Meanwhile, those who have genuinely advanced scientific knowledge in their fields, like Dr Abdus Salam, are forgotten simply because of their religious beliefs. It is sad that when the Higgs boson particle was recently discovered, none of our media pundits conducted the kind of extensive talk shows on Dr Salam's contribution to this great discovery, like the ones they have devoted to the 'invention' of the water kit.

*Courtesy: The Express Tribune, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012*

*Comment:*

I've seen the programs myself and Mr Agha repeatedly declared the '*water kit works on 100% pure distilled water and nothing else*' and '*that it used electrolysis to split the water into gas*'

Now go and ask any metric pass who paid any attention to chemistry lesson that *distilled water without a presence of an electrolyte would not be a very thermodynamically sound process* and would incur heavy energy loss i.e. less than 100% efficiency from the very word go (if at all efficient)

Then there is the fact that you just *cannot claim to break the universal 'law' of thermodynamics and conservation of energy*. These are not theories but laws that corroborate with physical existence of you and me.

Having said all that, the nation whose 'father of science' (AQ Khan) fails to understand even the basics of scientific reasoning and supports this fraudster based on an article *published in the Reader's digest some 30 years ago* probably deserves to be made a mockery out of.

Please don't let this guy run away with your hopes, aspirations and money and please find yourselves a better 'father of science'

■

### The Water Car Fraud

*Pervez Hoodbhoy*

Agha Waqar Ahmad deserves a medal from the people of Pakistan for his great service to the nation. In a few short days, he has exposed just how far Pakistan has fallen into the pit of ignorance and self-delusion. No practical joker could have demonstrated more dramatically the true nature of our country's political leaders, popular TV anchors and famed scientists.

At first, it sounded like a joke: a self-styled engineer, trained in Khairpur's polytechnic institute, claims to have invented a 'water kit' enabling any car to run on water alone. It didn't matter that the rest of world couldn't extract energy from water; he had done it. He promised a new Pakistan with limitless energy, no need for petrol or gas, and no more loadshedding. For an energy starved nation, it is a vision of paradise.

Agha Waqar Ahmad is now a national celebrity thanks to Religious Affairs Minister Khursheed Shah. Federal ministers Mir Hazar Khan Bijarani and Qamar Zaman Kaira have added their commendations. President Asif Ali Zardari has expressed his delight. The cabinet has met three times to discuss the water vehicle, and a fourth meeting is scheduled. Reports suggest millions may be spent on the 'water fuel kit project'.

The media has rushed in to celebrate the new national hero. For TV anchor Talat Husain, thanks to Agha Waqar Ahmad's invention, Pakistan's image can go from a country ravaged by terrorism to one of boundless possibilities. Anchor Hamid Mir and Senator Parvaiz Rasheed drove around Islamabad sitting next to the inventor, wondering how to protect the man's life from Western oil companies. Anchor Arshad Sharif was euphoric about the \$14 billion Pakistan would save on oil imports.

Pakistan's most celebrated scientists were not far behind. Asked by Anchor Sharif whether a car could run only on water, nuclear hero Dr Samar Mubarakmand replied without hesitation: "*jee haan, bilkul ho sakta hai*" (yes, absolutely possible). For his part, Hamid Mir asked Dr AQ Khan if there was any chance of this being a fraud. The response was clear: "*Main nay apnay level per investigate kiya hai aur koi fraud waraud nahi kiya hai*" (I have investigated the matter and there is no fraud involved). The head of the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Dr Shaukat Parvaiz, went further: "*hum nay bhi iss pay kam karaya tha*" (we had some work done on this too).

So, what is the problem? It's that the laws of physics, in particular a fundamental scientific principle known as the Second Law of Thermodynamics, impose inviolable constraints. Every machine constructed anywhere uses the Second Law. This is something that I learned in my first year as a student at MIT and have taught for 40 years. No serious scientist would dream of challenging the Second Law. Agha Waqar Ahmad's 'water kit', if one believes science to be right, simply cannot work. What the inventor, the ministers, the anchors and scientists claim on TV is wrong.

To his credit, the only person on TV that seemed to know this elementary principle was Dr Attaur Rahman, a chemist and a former HEC chairman. I have not agreed with all his actions and views in the past, but he alone rejected the claims about the new machine. Sadly, he was not able to hold back the tide of a nation desperate for any answer to its energy woes.

The water fraud will be exposed soon enough and, like a bad posterior smell, will go away. A simple experiment will make this happen faster. Here's how: take an emergency electricity generator, of which there are thousands in Islamabad. Its engine is similar to that in a car. Remove the fuel tank and make sure the 'water kit' contains only water. Then ask the inventor to connect it up and run the generator. Let there be enough sharp-eyed witnesses of intelligence and integrity.

But this episode raises bigger questions. Scientific frauds exist in other countries, but what explains their spectacular success in Pakistan? Answer: our leaders are lost in the dark, fumbling desperately for a miracle; our media is chasing spectacle, not truth; and our great scientists care more about being important than about evidence. It is easy for them all to get away with this. As a nation, we have proven unwilling to do the hard work needed to learn to reason, to be sceptical, to demand proof, to understand even basic science. It is easier to believe the world is run by magic and conspiracies, to wish and wait for Aladin's magic lamp. We live in the age of *jahilliya*.

*Courtesy: The Express Tribune, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012*

### **Poll Shows Atheism on the Rise in the U.S.**

*Kimberly Winston*

Religiosity is on the decline in the U.S. and atheism is on the rise, according to a new worldwide poll. The poll, called "The Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism," found that the number of Americans who say they are "religious" dropped from 73 percent in 2005 (the last time the poll was conducted) to 60 percent.

At the same time, the number of Americans who say they are atheists rose, from 1 percent to 5 percent. The poll was conducted by WIN-Gallup International and is based on interviews with 50,000 people from 57 countries and five continents. Participants were asked, “Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?”

The seven years between the polls is notable because 2005 saw the publication of “The End of Faith” by Sam Harris, the first in a wave of best-selling books on atheism by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and other so-called “New Atheists.”

“The obvious implication is that this is a manifestation of the New Atheism movement,” said Ryan Cragun, a University of Tampa sociologist of religion who studies American and global atheism.

Still, Cragun does not believe the poll shows more people are becoming atheists, but rather that more people are willing to identify as atheists.

“For a very long time, religiosity has been a central characteristic of the American identity,” he said. “But what this suggests is that is changing and people are feeling less inclined to identify as religious to comply with what it means to be a good person in the U.S.”

Another possible factor may be the number of atheists within organized efforts by American atheist groups to encourage those who do not believe in God to say so publicly. The Out Campaign, a project of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, was launched in 2007 and has since been endorsed by several national atheist groups.

The current poll confirms a declining religiosity — both at home and abroad — that’s been detected in other polls. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 15 percent of Americans said they have no religion — different from being a “confirmed atheist,” but nonetheless up from 8 percent in 1990.

Barry Kosmin, the principal investigator for the ARIS report, said he’s skeptical of the new study.



“The U.S. trends are what we have found and would expect, but the actual numbers are peculiar to say the least,” he said. “The drops in religiosity seem too sharp for the time period — people just don’t change their beliefs that quickly. Most of the trend away from religion has demographic causes and demography moves ‘glacially.’”

Specifically, he points to the poll’s finding that Vietnam, while showing a sharp 23 percent drop in religiosity since 2005, also shows no atheists. “Eight million Communist Party members but zero atheists?” he said. “That statistic makes me very doubtful of the accuracy of the survey overall and some of the international comparisons.”

Other findings from the poll include:

- Besides Vietnam, Ireland had the greatest change in religiosity, down from 69 percent to 47 percent.
- China has the most “convinced atheists,” at 47 percent, followed by Japan (31 percent), Czech Republic (30 percent) and France (29 percent)
- The most religious countries are in Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya), South America (Brazil, Peru) and Eastern Europe (Macedonia, Romania, Armenia).
- Countries with the same percentage of atheists as the U.S. are Poland, Moldova and Saudi Arabia.

*Courtesy: Religion News Service, Published: August 13, 2012*



### **It’s Time to Eradicate Superstitious Beliefs from Society**

Activists blame that due to lack of political will the Anti-superstition Bill has not seen the light of day. Though the bill has been approved five times by state cabinet and has been finally introduced in the assembly, it is yet to be debated. Many feel the new law will help uproot evil practices followed in the name of religion.

**Speak Up** throws light on the matter.



### Speak Up

#### **New law will help in curbing evil practices**

The Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS) for the last 22 years has been working in the state against the spread of superstition in society. MANS is also actively working with police and the court of law to uproot the evil superstitious practices. We feel that speedy enactment of law will protect people from being misguided.

There are many unscrupulous people in society who take advantage of people's belief in superstition and cheat them of their money. Hence, it is essential to enact a law to protect innocent people from those who take advantage of ignorance that prevails within our society. The Anti-superstition Bill has been approved five times by the state cabinet till now but still hasn't been passed by the assembly and council. The bill has for the first time been introduced in the assembly but is yet to be debated. The present government is showing no interest in passing the bill.

The enactment of new law will surely help in curbing evil and uncivilised practices in Maharashtra as the existing laws have failed to do so.

Dr. Narendra Dabholkar

**Ajit Pawar has promised to look into the matter**

There is a general lack of scientific and technological outlook within our society due to which attempts to remove superstitious practices and rituals take a backstage and never given priority. I had a discussion with deputy chief minister of Maharashtra Ajit Pawar and he has promised to look into the matter. I have not gone into the details of the Anti-superstition Bill when it was proposed for the first time, but I promise to do my best to ensure that the bill gets through.

We have to understand that the Dalit populace has become progressive because they are now staying away from such superstitious practices that prevailed previously. As a progressive state, we have to get rid of such evil rituals.

Jaideo Gaikwad, NCP, MLC

**Witch-hunting is still prevalent in the state, which is violent**

The Anti-superstition Bill is very important because as a society we have still not changed our outlook towards superstitious ritualistic practices. We are still stuck with the old belief systems and rituals. For example, witch-hunting is still prevalent in the state, which is grossly violent and happens mostly for snatching property rights of widows. Even child sexual abuse and killing cases keep popping up every now and then, which is a heinous and hard to digest practice and can be eradicated only if there is a strong law in place.

Believing in religious practices and having faith in certain religious beliefs is part of our fundamental rights but following barbaric and evil rituals is not.

We need strong laws to protect our people from falling prey to such rituals. I have come across bizarre cases of superstitious belief in our society wherein an HIV person was told to have sex with a child to get rid of his disease. Such sickening beliefs need to be changed immediately as it is causing huge damage to our society.

Asim Sarode, Human Rights Activist

**Vote bank politics is cause for delay in passing the bill**

We desperately need to overcome superstitious practices that are still prevalent in our society. These evil rituals are absolutely dangerous and must be eradicated quickly. The reason why Anti-superstition Bill is not being cleared by the government is due to lack of political will. People are taking political mileage as it is all connected to the vote bank politics, which in my opinion is the reason why it has not been passed for the last so many years. The state will keep saying that it is serious about passing the bill but in reality will always keep it pending. We need an Anti-superstition law even though it is not immediately life threatening. People have to be educated against superstition and law will help in protecting innocent lives. Such evil acts should be condemned and discouraged.

Dr Hemant Chandorkar, Consulting Psychiatrist

*Courtesy: DNA, Pune Edition*

**Miracle Buster: Why I Traced Holy Water to Leaky Drain**

*Sanal Edamaruku*

**What was the so-called "miracle" you recently investigated in Mumbai?**

The priest and the very active Catholic laity organisations associated with the Our Lady of Velankanni church in Mumbai were promoting the idea that water dripping from the feet of a statue of Jesus was a sign from God. Hundreds of believers flocked to the dripping cross, collecting and consuming "holy" drainage water that they believed would cure all ailments.

**What prompted you to intervene?**

I was invited to the Delhi studio of TV9, a Mumbai-based national channel, to comment. During the programme, I rejected the possibility of a miracle, but of course could not give scientific explanations without an investigation. The channel then invited me to come to Mumbai. The church authorities agreed.

**What did you find?**

I had a close look at a nearby washroom and the connected drainage system that passed underneath the concrete base of the cross. I removed some stones from the drain and found it

was blocked. I touched the walls, the base and the cross and took some photographs for documentation. It was very simple: water from the washroom, which had been blocked in the clogged drainage system, had been transmitted via capillary action into the adjacent walls and the base of the cross as well as into the wooden cross itself. The water came out through a nail hole and ran down over the statue's feet.

**You now face possible arrest. Why?**

Leaders of two Catholic laity organisations have launched charges against me under section 295A of the Indian penal code. This charges a person with "deliberately hurting religious feelings and attempting malicious acts intended to outrage the religious sentiments of any class or community". It is absurd to claim that I did anything of the sort.

**What do you fear might happen to you?**

If it comes to a trial, I have nothing to fear. I would welcome the opportunity to throw some light on the role that the Catholic church played and is still playing today, here in India. The possibility of arrest is threatening, however.

**Do you have any regrets about intervening?**

Why would one not intervene when somebody gives gullible people sewage to drink? But my reason is broader. The promotion of superstition and belief in paranormal phenomena dulls people's minds and establishes dangerous misconceptions about reality in our society. Such efforts have to be countered.

**Why do people so readily believe in miracles?**

For many, the regressive belief in superstitions and miracles is an escape from the hardships of life. Once trapped into irrationalism, they become more incapable of mastering reality. It is a vicious circle, like an addiction. They become vulnerable to exploitation by astrologers, godmen, dubious pseudo-psychologists, corrupt politicians and the whole mega-industry of irrationalism.

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## **The Vatican's Woes: God's Bankers**

Few things annoy Vatican officials more than lurid novels that depict the papacy as the secretive heart of a global conspiracy. Pope Benedict XVI's most senior official, his secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, this month accused journalists of trying to imitate the

American writer, Dan Brown, author of the preposterous—and bestselling—“The Da Vinci Code”. But it was not reporters who put the papal butler, Paolo Gabriele, in a four-by-four-metre cell, accused of leaking a stream of confidential letters. Nor was it they who, the next day, fired the head of the Vatican Bank, Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, and published a blistering statement accusing him of failing to do his job. An Italian police investigation, in which documents were seized from Mr Gotti Tedeschi on June 5th, has stoked fears of more scandal. He has since been quoted as saying he fears for his life.



Behind the rows is an intense and vituperative power struggle to determine the nature of the next papacy. It is largely waged in and around the Vatican's financial institutions. The Institute for the Works of Religion (IOR), to give the Vatican bank its formal title, is no stranger to controversy. In the 1980s it was accused of involvement in financial skulduggery and responsibility for the still-mysterious death of a prominent Italian banker, Roberto Calvi.

Now it is seeking to clear its name of involvement in money laundering. According to La Repubblica, a newspaper, a draft report of the Council of Europe gives the Vatican a clean bill of health on all but eight of 49 criteria. More than ten objections would expose the Vatican to the risk of being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force, a body that polices banks. (A Council of Europe meeting in Strasbourg on July 4th reviewed the report; the Vatican now has a month to respond.)

Mr Gotti Tedeschi had originally been brought in with Cardinal Bertone's blessing. But he opposed a new law, backed by the cardinal, that increased the secretary of state's powers at the expense of the existing—independent—oversight body, the Financial Information Authority.

The change fitted a wider pattern. Since returning to the Vatican six years ago, Cardinal Bertone has won ever-greater clout.

### **Stumbling on a rock**

The 77-year-old prelate is not a true Vatican insider. He was the pope's right-hand man when the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger headed the department that enforces doctrinal orthodoxy. For the rest of his career Cardinal Bertone was a pastoral cleric. Underlings in the secretariat resent the vigorous, soccer-loving former archbishop for his lack of diplomatic experience.

Intrigues are not unusual in the Vatican. What makes this conflict special, however, is Cardinal Bertone's repeated grabs for the levers of financial control—and perhaps, his foes say, for the patronage that goes with them. Last year he tried to make the IOR rescue a renowned but debt-stricken hospital. Mr Gotti Tedeschi's refusal to do that heralded their later rows. The leaked papal letters also show that Cardinal Bertone tried unsuccessfully to bluff the then archbishop of Milan into resigning a post that controls the city's Catholic University.

To strengthen his position further, Cardinal Bertone promoted close associates and former subordinates from the region around his former diocese of Genoa and his native Piedmont, also in the north-west of Italy. He put one in charge of the Vatican's treasury and appointed another to run its central bank (not the same as the IOR). A third Bertone confidante has been made governor of the Vatican City State, the Holy See's temporal power-base. That also carries great financial clout. All three men were made cardinals in February.

These promotions intensified suspicion among Cardinal Bertone's critics that he was trying to pack the next conclave: the assembly of cardinals that will elect the next pope. Sombre hints suggest that this vote may come sooner than expected. According to another leaked document, the cardinal archbishop of Palermo had said that the 85-year-old Benedict would be dead by November.

For a secretary of state to ascend to the throne of St Peter is rare: the only example since 1667 was Pius XII, in 1939. Whatever his ambitions, Cardinal Bertone has proved a singularly divisive figure. The early years of Benedict's papacy saw a stream of diplomatic gaffes, which many Vatican officials blamed on his secretary of state's lack of experience. Little has improved. Some had hoped that, as a semi-outsider, he would bring innovation and transparency to a central bureaucracy last reformed in 1967. But the leaked correspondence suggests that, on the

contrary, he has acted to protect vested interests, for example dismissing a prelate who had helped save more than €40m (\$50m) by scrapping cosy procurement arrangements.

Some unconfirmed reports suggest that the cardinal has offered his resignation but the pope has refused to accept it. On July 4th, before going to his summer retreat, Benedict issued a rare public statement decrying “unjust criticism” of Cardinal Bertone and praising his “discreet support” and “enlightened counsel”, which were “of particular help in recent months”. The pontiff may fear that, by dropping his chief aide, he would be tacitly admitting to poor judgment in appointing him. But as long as the secretary of state stays, the infighting in the Vatican seems likely to continue, and the outside world’s grave concerns about its administration will remain.

*Courtesy: The Economist*



### India’s ‘Godmen’ Face Questions About Wealth

*Simon Denyer*



PUTTAPARTHI, India — For centuries, their image was as barefoot ascetics who spent their lives in solitary Himalayan meditation.



But now India's gurus, "miracle workers" and spiritual leaders, often collectively known as "godmen," have become savvy, powerful figures who control vast philanthropic and business empires, dabble in politics and manipulate the media.

With that power and wealth, however, have come questions about the business of religion, fueled in recent months by the discoveries of hoards of gold, silver, diamonds and cash, the declaration of assets running into hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, and accusations of money laundering.

The godmen range from "miracle-workers" and "living gods," such as Sathya Sai Baba, the diminutive holy man with a black Afro who left behind a secret trove of gold, silver and cash when he died in April, to yoga gurus including Baba Ramdev, a television star who joined a popular campaign against official corruption, only to be investigated for tax evasion.

The rising wealth and prominence of the godmen in the past two decades has accompanied rising incomes in India and the liberalization of the media. To an extent, it also mirrors the rising political popularity of the Hindu nationalist movement, with its assertion of pride in Hindu traditions and values.

But their popularity is more an expression of "the extraordinary religiosity of the Indian people, which has withstood the forces of education and modernization," said historian Ramchandra Guha. "Its manifestation is the offering of money and jewels to a deity, whether living or frozen in stone."

Often their most devoted followers come from the middle classes, and donations also stream in from Indians abroad. The flood of money is partly a function of the huge rise in disposable income that many Indians now enjoy, but some sociologists say it reflects a need to balance newfound wealth with old-fashioned values.

"The Indian middle classes are a very schizophrenic bunch of people," said Meera Nanda, author of "The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu," who argues that it

is time the religious trusts were properly regulated, audited and taxed. “They look at renunciation, asceticism, a life of simplicity as a higher ideal, but that is an ideal hardly anyone can live up to with this growing wealth. Giving ends up doing the balancing act for them.”

And give they certainly have.

When Sai Baba died in April, his personal chambers were found to contain \$2.8 million in cash, along with gold and silver worth about \$5 million. Cupboards contained cloth bags filled with diamonds, hundreds of robes, more than 500 pairs of shoes and dozens of bottles of perfume and hair spray.

While his followers insist Sai Baba never even had a bank account, the trust in his name is thought to be worth about \$10 billion.

### **Modern celebrity culture**

While Sai Baba generated mystique by limiting his private audiences, the black-bearded and bare-chested Ramdev’s popularity owes more than a little to modern celebrity culture. Like television evangelists in the United States, Ramdev is one of a new generation of gurus skilled at manipulating modern media. At least 30 million people tune into his daily TV program, and he said last year that television had made him “a hundred times more powerful.”

But when he joined a popular movement against official corruption with a brief fast in June, Ramdev’s supporters were beaten and tear-gassed by police and he was forced to declare his assets.

His trust alone was found to be worth \$250 million, a figure that probably includes his yoga university but not his Scottish island — renamed Peace Island — or global business interests that include a pharmaceutical company producing ayurvedic medicine and herbal products.

The government, seeing Ramdev as a political rival, first accused him of money laundering and then opened an income-tax investigation.

“The numbers are staggering, but the idea that fabulous wealth resides in these places is not a surprise,” said social commentator and columnist Santosh Desai, who says that followers often

take pride in the wealth of their chosen gurus. “It is curious in a way, for something ostensibly about a distance from things material and closeness to things spiritual, the two sit side by side very comfortably.”

**Spiritual succor**

While some of the self-styled godmen are crooks or charlatans, many provide immense spiritual succor to their followers. When Sai Baba died of heart failure, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called it an “irreparable loss,” describing him as a “spiritual leader who inspired millions.”

Sai Baba’s philosophy of love, social service and the universality of all religions proved both appealing and powerful, with his motto of “Love all, serve all,” and his message that more merit could be gained through service to humanity than through religious observance.

Once a tiny, impoverished Indian village, his birthplace of Puttaparthi in southern India is now a small city, boasting an airport, a four-lane highway, a free hospital, a university, a music college, a space theater, a stadium and an “international” sports hall, all painted in pastel shades of yellow, orange, blue and pink.

But with the vast wealth have come, almost inevitably, questions about whether that money was being properly accounted for, and whose pockets it was ending up in. Those questions were fueled when police stopped a car leaving Puttaparthi shortly after the guru’s death that contained nearly \$1 million in cash.

Police say they and the income tax department are carrying out parallel investigations, and some Puttaparthi residents took to the streets this month to call for more transparency in the way Sai Baba’s estate is run.

Yet few of his devotees, who include some of India’s leading politicians and industrialists, as well as Goldie Hawn and Hard Rock Cafe founder Isaac Tigrett, seem to care. India’s most famous cricketer, Sachin Tendulkar, wept openly at Sai Baba’s funeral.

“You can see all the buildings and you can go there, so at least part of the money was spent on something good,” Michiel Vanaerschot, 24, of Belgium said with a slight shrug. “People who don’t believe, they just can’t handle it.”

At Prashanti Nilayam, or Temple of Peace, the sprawling ashram at the heart of his empire, devotees talk of how Sai Baba appeared in their dreams, of miracles he had performed to heal them or their family members, or, like Marie Duffy, 25, of Ireland, just of the extraordinary “energy” of the place.

But his record was also deeply controversial. Allegations of sexual abuse of teenage boys surfaced repeatedly, although no charges were ever brought; video evidence seemed to show that some of his trademark miracles, regurgitating a golden egg or producing a Rolex watch out of thin air, were merely sleight of hand.

■

### Miracle or Mirage?

*Prabhakar Nanawaty*

*Who are you,*

*Who am I*

*And who is he*

*He is the who of the you in the I of the you in which the he in which you are the I and I is the you and that you in you and he in you.....*

Can you make out anything meaningful in this blabbering? Impossible. This is what generally goes in the name of spiritualism by the so called Godmen (and Godwomen too!). Of course, at least in India, these Godmen resort to flowery regional language and mesmerize the gullible audience with their command of oratory, impressive personality and aura that had been created around them. 'Satsang' is the name for these sermons and one will find hundreds of followers gather at a designated place and listen to this chattering for an hour or so and go back to their respective places fully satisfied, mentally 'fit' and carrying the burden of blessings to do

whatever (crooked!) business in which they are engaged. Surprisingly the majority of audience attending these Satsang is normally aged (and obese) women folk who probably force their men and young ones to attend the Satsang so that their sins will be washed out during that



brief period of lecture by Godmen. If one listens to these sermons carefully, one will not find anything meaningful, useful or ethical. There is no iota of truth in what they say. Sometimes they may quote some eternal truth for which the audience gets excited and praises the Godmen for the quotation and their mastery over spiritualism. Audience is indebted to Satsang and often visits as long as Godmen is in the town. An expensive and decorated platform, huge Pandal or a hall for seating arrangements and high tech (Dolby/ Bose) sound system and lighting arrangements hypnotise the newcomers. In the gathering there will be number of Godmen's paid agents who prompt the audience to praise the Godmen at times. However, nothing is free in this world, including Godmen's blessings too. Satsang listeners have to shell out hefty donations so that Godmen and his cronies have all the comforts in the world and amass the wealth at the expense of the gullible audience.

Nowadays where ever you look around , you will find these cult figures - self proclaimed great spiritual men (and also women) - with supernatural powers spreading their net to catch their prey from all walks of life, all strata of society, rich or poor, young or old, men or women. This

ever spreading Godmanship bewilders a rational mind. However every strata of the society has its own Godmen depending upon its paying capacity. It is like a medical treatment.



The medical treatment of any particular illness differs according to what the family can afford; the same principle of affordability applies to the supply of Godmen and their crafts. An ignorant woman from rural area takes her sick child to a village physician while a middle class woman at a Taluka place sees a medical practitioner with some qualification in medicine. For the same illness a higher middle class woman from a city will approach a child specialist and a child from a very rich family will avail itself of the services of a team of specialists and a well equipped hospital all for the same illness.

Like medicine these so called faith healers too work at different levels differently. A Bhagat or a Devarishi is consulted for overcoming difficulties by poor and ignorant toiling masses in the villages; those who are a little bit educated approach an astrologer or a palmist for their problems or to a road side bogus man who has a parrot that comes out to foretell the customer's future. Talismans, amulets, charms are, of course, always there to mitigate difficulties. The educated middle class man with a good job or business undertakes the traditional rituals or visits the temple of his faith, or approaches local Godmen to find solutions to his problems and finds fulfillment of his life in their service. The Godmen at the highest

pedestal work for the people at the highest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Leading politicians, big bureaucrats, wealthy industrialists, art and sport celebrities require equally high class Babas (and Matajis). So they call upon either Mata Amrutanandmayi or Ravi Shankar, or Ramdev Baba and attribute all their achievements so far and their assured future success to the favour and blessings of these great agents of the God.



This all pervading maze of Godmen cult is utterly baffling. The electronic media had accelerated the process of this cult by telecasting their rattling on one or the other channel at all hours of viewing. In fact there are channels especially for the devoted (God, Astha, Sanatan etc) that would get (perverted) satisfaction to view and listen to the programs telecasted on these channels. But nowadays even news and entertainment channels are also telecasting these Satsng lectures and thus forcing the innocent viewers to shut down the TV (forever!). One wonders who pays for these expensive TV cost.

A little in-depth deliberation on this point will reveal the real nature of Godmen. Sometimes one wonders in spite of the number of Godmen who actually treat in some way or other or perform any miracles is not significant; and there exists a great number of Godmen who do not do anything by way of treatment or miracles and yet have a massive number of followers. These followers find their respective Godmen their sole protector and savior. These Godmen,

instead of actually treating the people or performing miracles they still loot and exploit gullible people in the name of salvation, devotion to god, divinity, divine knowledge, etc. Their power does not rest in the ability to deceive people. It is rooted in something else. These Godmen very skillfully link with themselves the amazing longing for beatification that is traditionally rooted in the minds of people. Therein lays their power. This can be called 'debauchery in salvation'.

There are amazing types of Godmen. Every profession these days has many branches and sub-branches. The ever prospering business of Godmen is no exception to this. The Babas, and Maharajas can be classified in many ways. There is no intension here to insist on a particular classification, but the nature of their operating suggests the following types.

- Mantrik (one who uses mantras i.e. chants), Devarishi (who treats visitations from deities), Bhagat (one who deals with daemons). Not only do they cheat and misguide people; they also commit grave, culpable criminal acts.
- Many Babas and Mahrajas promise to cure the chronic illness of the patients. Their treatment appears simple and innocuous. The needy poor find it supportive and consoling but in reality the patient's life is at risk.
- A few Godmen acquire their popularity by performing so called miracles which are nothing but magicians' tricks. Satya Sai Baba was the best example of this category. He used to wave his empty hand in the air and captures sacred ash or silver and gold rings. Science tells us that such miracles just cannot happen. The claim of these Godmen and women performing miracles is one more type of Godmen cult that exploits the emotions of the gullible faithful.
- The Godmen cult that couples spirituality with science. This cult is carried out by coupling traditional spiritual concepts with auto-hypnosis.
- A few Godmen acquire their name by using philosophical and spiritual language, and hypnotism: Acharya Rajanish who later became Bhgawan Rajanish, still later called himself Osho is the best example of this class. His deep study of philosophy, impressive eloquence both in English and Hindi, magnetic personality and use of hypnosis helped in firmly establishing his reputation. He was convicted and asked to leave America or else be sentenced to 125 years of imprisonment. Many countries refused to allow him asylum on their soil. This exposes his so called spirituality and philosophy.





- Sometimes you come across mentally retarded person had been elevated as Godman. He is mentally ill or plain stupid. He does not have an opinion of his own or not even awareness. He does not abide by any rules of cleanliness and decent attire or by conventions of speech or eating habits. But the traditional Indian society glorifies such people as Videhi (weaned from earthly pursuits) or Avaliya (absorbed in contemplation). Some people develop great respect for such a man. Their admiration and reverence for him is utilized by a few shrewd men to convert the mad man into a Baba. The gang then can use this Baba to establish a roaring business.
- Some Babas use debauchery techniques to attract women folk. Why women become victims of the Godmen's lust is a topic of continuous discourse and difference of opinions. But that the Godmen take unwarranted advantage of women's sentimental nature, helplessness and pent up emotions has been proved over and over again.
- The Hindus believe in the phenomenon of incarnation. Some Babas exploit this belief in incarnation to become popular among the people. They declare themselves to be the incarnation of this or that god. At present one such Baba, who calls himself Kalki Bhagawan - an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is doing roaring business in the south of the country.

If one tries to study the psyche of the disciples of these Godmen, one will find that there are numerous reasons to fall as a victim to the Godmen cult. There may be

- Helplessness, lack of stability, guilt feeling
- The fear of calamity
- Fulfilling the unfulfilled desires
- Mental illness
- Psychosomatic illness
- Exorbitant price and lack of health care facilities
- The frustration
- Atma (Soul), Paramatma (Supreme soul), Brahma, Parabrahma, Moksha (emancipation), Mukti (liberation)
- The power that controls the universe and the theory of Incarnation
- Need to express culturally
- Non-critical Social psyche
- Gaining Social Prestige
- Intimidation by money, power, media and gangsters
- Dread of evil powers
- The business racket
- Government recognition and acceptance by society
- Rumour and mouth to mouth publicity
- Lack of soldierly attitude and ennui
- Insatiate sex life of desire remains unfulfilled.
- Falling prey to professional techniques used by Godmen

It is well known that a visit to a Godmen brings some relief to an individual but it has nothing to do with the miraculous power attributed to the Godmen. The solution to the crises and the relief may be due to

- Method of exhausting the mind and the body.
- Secretion of endorphin, a biochemical substance, in the brain that induces the feeling of well being.
- Behaving as per suggestions – psycho-somatic illnesses are cured by giving suggestions to the mind, for which the Baba gets the credit.

- Placebo effect – The trust that Baba’s blessings are a sure way to recovery brings relief to the patient.
- Self curable disease – Some diseases are cured automatically after some interval. If the patient receives Baba’s blessings during this period, the Baba gets the credit.
- Counseling – Talking with the Baba or seeking his advice is a kind of counseling which proves effective at times and the credit goes to Baba’s divine powers.
- Spontaneous Regression – Patient’s immunity increases all of a sudden and the disease subsides. The reason of the sudden increase in immunity has not yet been discovered by science. But the so called miracle is attributed to the Baba’s blessings.

In fact man’s love of congregation – man’s critical faculty becomes dim in a group. His ability to discern right from wrong, proper from improper and true from false- his capacity to reason disappears. The huge crowd that gathers in Baba’s congregation extols Baba’s virtues and powers. So the individual caught in such a big crowd feels that his problems are being solved. These are typical of the wizened sages to whom otherwise-sensible people give their devotion and unquestioning obedience, surrendering their independence, willpower, and life’s savings in the hope of realizing for themselves “enlightenment” as they ascribe to the “perfect, God-realized” master.

As Meera Nanda puts it, it is a God's Market. There is a very strong pull of market forces and there is a possibility that you will be next victim unless you protect yourself. Don’t let it happen to you. Don’t get suckered in. Be prepared. Be informed.

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### Extra Sensory Power

*Yadneshwar Nigale*

Shri Shivaram Barve from a Village in Dicholi often writes on various topics in the daily ‘Navaprabha’. In one of his recent articles he has raised a question, ‘can telepathy exist?’ The curiosity and the quest of knowledge of this gentleman are admirable. Telepathy is considered to be one of the so called miraculous, supernatural powers; something divine and beyond

mundane human abilities. Human beings all along believed that there are people who possess supernatural powers and can perceive things and phenomena inapprehensible to common people. They can describe or draw pictures of things not seen by them. This is called clairvoyance; knowing in advance what is going to happen in future is called premonition; e.g. seeing the death of a dear one in advance; knowing exactly what a person is thinking although he is far away is called telepathy and moving or bending things from a distance is called psychokinesis.

People are much interested in hearing about those who claim such supernatural powers. Even scientists are interested in the study and investigation into the claims of supernatural powers. However it was found that those who claimed that their studies confirmed the existence of supernatural powers were not beyond doubt. There were many flaws and errors in their investigations and experiments. Deeper and more detailed investigations proved their claims to be false. All investigations made by many scientists, in laboratories all over the world have failed to provide any decisive evidence to prove the existence of any supernatural powers of Extra Sensory Perception (ESP). ESP therefore is not recognized as a branch of psychology. In every period of history of every culture, claims of contacts between people faraway from each others being established through ESP can be found. (Dr. Vartak from Pune is one such example. Not only does he claim to establish contact through ESP, but he also claims of being able to visit various planets in Sookshma Deha -the ethereal body or the sentient soul.) These claims are supposed to be matters of religious chants and occult sciences. They, therefore, were not paid much attention.

It was in the latter half of the 19th century that attention first was drawn to ESP. In England the Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882. This was followed by the American Society of Psychical Research established in 1887. Many other countries too were interested in the investigation of this phenomenon and established their own institutions wherein reputed scientists participated in the research work. Some universities too undertook research in this field in support of these institutions. However all these efforts could not produce any conclusive evidence for the existence of ESP.

In order to study Telepathy as a science a specific method of study and research needed to be developed. Many methods were invented and used. But the one invented by the Psychiatrist Rhine is now used as a standard method. This method consists of cards like playing cards. A set is made up of 25 cards. Every card has one of the signs-square, star, cross, circle and line. This sign is printed on the card in black ink in thick and large size.

One of the persons giving this test, say A, sits in one room. The other person, B, who sends messages to A, sits in another room. It is ensured that these two will not be able to communicate with each other in any way. The person B is shown some cards and is supposed to convey to A what card he has. The number of cards A correctly recognizes is counted at the end. For the test of Clairvoyance the cards are kept on the table so that the signs on the cards are not seen. The person claiming clairvoyance is asked to tell the order of the signs on the cards. In the test for cognition, the person is expected to tell in what order the cards will get arranged after shuffling. But he has to predict the order before shuffling. Finally the results of the tests are compared and tallied. The results failed to prove the existence of ESP and the claims of Telepathy, Clairvoyance or Cognition were proved to be false.

Many books are written to prove the existence of ESP describing innumerable incidents for evidence. They take it for granted that ESP exists and extol the supernatural powers possessed by those people who make a claim to such powers. But experts have raised many doubts regarding the authenticity of the happenings and personalities described in these books.

Translated by Suman O ak

